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Opera (i)

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Opera (i)

(It., from Lat. *opera*, plural of *opus*: 'work'; Fr. *opéra*; Ger. *Oper*).

The present article surveys the origins and the history of opera and its presentation. For fuller discussion of the history of individual sub-genres and related genres, the reader is referred to the entries listed below. Discussion of opera houses and operatic activity in particular cities will be found in entries on the cities concerned, and of the works of individual composers within their entries.

See also **AZIONE TEATRALE; BALLAD OPERA; BALLET DE COUR; BALLET-HÉROÏQUE; BURLESQUE; BURLETTA; CHAMBER OPERA; COMÉDIE-BALLET; DIVERTISSEMENT; DRAME LYRIQUE; DRAMMA GIOSOSO; DRAMMA PER MUSICA; ENTRÉE; EXTRAVAGANZA; FARSA; FAVOLA IN MUSICA; FESTA TEATRALE; FILM MUSICAL; GRAND OPÉRA; INTERMÈDE; INTERMEDIO; INTERMEZZO (II); JESUITS; LEHRSTÜCK; LIBRETTO; LIEDERSPIEL; MADRIGAL COMEDY; MÄRCHENOPER; MASQUE; MEDIEVAL DRAMA; MELODRAMA; MELODRAMMA; MONODRAMA; MUSICAL; MUSIC DRAMA; MUSIC THEATRE; NUMBER OPERA; OPÉRA-BALLET; OPÉRA BOUFFON; OPERA BUFFA; OPÉRA COMIQUE; OPÉRA-FÉERIE; OPERA SEMISERIA; OPERA SERIA; OPERETTA; PANTOMIME; PASTICCIO; PASTORAL; PASTORALE-HÉROÏQUE; POSSE; PUPPET OPERA, PUPPET THEATRE; RAPPRESENTAZIONE SACRA; RESCUE OPERA; SAINETE; SCHULDRAMA; SCHULOPER; SEMI-OPERA; SEPOLCRO; SERENATA; SINGSPIEL; SPIELOPER; TONADILLA; TOURNEY; TRAGÉDIE EN MUSIQUE; VAUDEVILLE; VERISMO; ZARZUELA; ZAUBEROPER; and ZEITOPER.**

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Opera (i), §I: 'Opera'

I. 'Opera'

Most narrowly conceived, the word 'opera' signifies a drama in which the actors sing throughout. There are, however, so many exceptions among the operatic works of the West – so many works popularly called operas in which some parts are spoken or mimed – that the word should be more generically defined as a drama in which the actors sing some or all of their parts. Numerous sub-genres, such as *opera seria*, *opera buffa*, *tragédie en musique* and the like, have grown up in the history of opera (information about these sub-genres will be found in separate entries). Some of the sub-genres mix spoken and sung drama in conventional ways. Thus, in operetta, Singspiel, *opéra comique* and musical comedy the dialogue is normally spoken and musical numbers interrupt the action from time to time. The history of opera is inextricably intertwined with the history of spoken drama. Moreover, since all operatic works combine music, drama and spectacle, though in varying degrees, all three principal elements should be taken into account in any comprehensive study of the genre, even though music has traditionally played the dominant role in the conception and realization of individual works.

The central importance of Italian musicians and poets in the development and early history of opera is suggested by the fact that the word 'opera' means simply 'work' in Italian and as such was applied to various categories of written or improvised plays in the 16th and early 17th centuries. To cite but one example arbitrarily, Francesco Andreini's play *L'ingannata Proserpina* (1611) – according to its dedication intended to be either recited or sung depending on the wishes of its producers – was called an *opera rappresentativa, e scenica*. The earliest operas either had no generic subtitle (like Ottavio Rinuccini's *Dafne* of 1598 and his *Euridice* of 1600) or else adopted one or another ad hoc definition: *favola*, *opera scenica*, *tragedia musicale*, *opera tragicomica musicale*, *dramma musicale* or the like (see Rosand, C(i)1991). It has been suggested (by Grout, A1947, and Pirrotta, *Li due Orfei*) that either the term *opera scenica* or the term *opera regia* (the latter meaning a drama with royal protagonists and a happy ending, a term applied to various *commedia dell'arte* scenarios as well as to Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* of 1643) might be the origin of the usage that defines 'opera' as a specifically musico-dramatic work. In the second third of the 17th century, however, *dramma per musica* became the normal term for opera, although in England the word 'opera' was used in this way as early as the 1650s to mean a dramatic work set to music (G. Strahle: *An Early Music Dictionary: Musical Terms from British Sources, 1500–1740*, Cambridge, 1995; John Evelyn used the term in 1644). Nevertheless, the use of the word 'opera' with this meaning seems to have developed only gradually; it became widespread much later than the invention and early development of the genre.

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Opera (i), §II: Origins

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Opera (i), §II: Origins

II. Origins

1. Background, precursors.

Music was inserted into plays as early as ancient Greek times. Choral songs, performed on occasion to the accompaniment of mimetic dancing, served to divide the play into sections and commented on the action in ancient Greek tragedy and comedy. During the 16th century, when Greek drama came to serve as a model for certain aspects of musical theatre, scholars debated the possibility that the plays were sung from beginning to end, a speculation long since abandoned, although it seems probable that some portions of Greek plays other than the choral interludes may also have been sung or at least declaimed musically, by soloists or ensembles of singers. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities continued and even expanded in Roman times. With the destruction of the Roman theatres in the 6th century, however, all trace of official theatrical activity, musical or otherwise, disappeared from the archival records. Professional entertainers – *mimi*, *histriones*, *joculatores* and the like – continued to perform plays and skits which combined music with acting during the early Middle Ages, though there is only fragmentary evidence of this.

A vast corpus of medieval drama with music survives. It can be roughly divided into two kinds: so-called liturgical drama (see **MEDIEVAL DRAMA**), and vernacular plays with incidental music. Some parts of the sacred service came to be dramatized in order to make the events depicted – and especially the Resurrection of Christ, his Nativity, and the events leading up to it – more vivid and immediate. These liturgical and paraliturgical dramas, whether performed in church as part of a service or somewhere else, were sung in chant from beginning to end. For this reason they have been called the first music dramas, though it should be stressed that the various repertoires of religious dialogues, ceremonies and plays from the Middle Ages are far from having common origins or a single continuous history.

Similarly diverse in origin, destination and nature are the various sorts of play in the vernacular that survive from as early as the 13th century, though most copiously from the 15th and 16th centuries. On the one hand, vast medieval mystery and morality plays that often lasted several days were organized by towns for the purposes of both religious celebration and commercial gain. On the other hand, during the 15th and 16th centuries, troupes of professional actors, members of various guilds, and even amateurs performed a more modest repertory of comedies and short plays for a variety of occasions in many countries of western Europe. Both the long religious plays and the shorter comedies made use of music as an incidental part of the action. Indeed, this use of music is one of the few things both kinds of play have in common. Only rarely did music play a larger role in vernacular drama. Adam de la Halle's *Jeu de Robin et Marion*, for example, written during the 1280s, is an exception in incorporating so many melodies (most of them presumably pre-existing) into its action.

None of these early musical-dramatic activities seems to have been connected historically. No single grand narrative can be written to link medieval drama to the history of 16th-century Italian comedy and tragedy, let alone to the events that led to the invention of opera in the early 17th century. The history of Italian upper-class theatre in the Renaissance should probably begin with the series of classical plays performed at the Ferrarese court in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, and especially the performances of comedies by Plautus and Terence that became models for many of the erudite written comedies during the century. These courtly performances of classical plays were commissioned by the duke and acted by the courtiers themselves. Later in the century, erudite neo-classical

comedies came to be performed by amateurs, by members of the learned academies that flourished during the century, or even by those professional troupes of actors who were better known for their ability to improvise comedies, the so-called *commedie dell'arte* (see [COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE](#)).

Learned comedy was, of course, not the only genre cultivated in Italy during the 15th and 16th centuries. *Sacre rappresentazioni*, church pageants enlivened with music (much of it related to *laude*), flourished; they may even have had an important influence on the establishment of the pastoral as a genre, or on the idea of vernacular drama with music, but those connections have yet to be solidly established. A repertory of rustic plays featuring peasants and other members of the lower classes also came to be written and performed. Eventually, too, the genre of tragedy was cultivated.

Some exceptional plays did not fit comfortably within any of the principal genres. Angelo Poliziano's *Orfeo*, performed at the court in Mantua about 1480, was such an exception. Poliziano called it a *favola*. Music played a central part. None of it survives, probably because it was not 'learned' written music but belonged rather to the tradition of improvised or semi-improvised music cultivated by Italian poet-musicians in the 15th century. One such poet-musician, Baccio Ugolini, played the role of Orpheus and accompanied himself on the 'lira', almost certainly the *lira da braccio*. In addition to Ugolini's solo sections, there were several choruses. It has been argued persuasively that there is some connection between Ugolini's performance and the philosopher Marsilio Ficino's Orphic singing to the lyre, if not between Ficino's ideas and Poliziano's play (Tomlinson, B1988). In any case, Poliziano's *Orfeo* was an important landmark in the pre-history of opera, not so much for its form or its influence as for its symbolic significance as a highly musical play outside the Aristotelian genres (it was neither tragedy nor comedy) that dealt with the power of music in a classical setting.

2. Immediate origins.

The traditional view of the origins of opera – that it developed directly from discussions in the 1570s led by Count Giovanni de' Bardi of Florence and his group of friends who constituted an informal academy known as the Camerata, and from later discussions in the circle around Jacopo Corsi – remains the best narrative of the events leading directly to the first operas: Rinuccini's *Dafne* of 1598 with music by Jacopo Peri and Jacopo Corsi, Rinuccini's *Euridice* of 1600, set by Peri and by Giulio Caccini, and Gabriello Chiabrera's *Il rapimento di Cefalo* of 1600, set by Caccini. (Emilio de' Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di Anima, et di Corpo* of 1600 should also be included in this group of early dramatic works, even though it was performed in Rome and by virtue of its subject matter is regarded as the first example of oratorio.) Among the many topics discussed by Bardi and his friends, music occupied an important place, and specifically the nature of ancient Greek music and the source of its emotive power. Moreover, various experiments in writing an appropriately dramatic music were made in Florence at the end of the century, most notably Vincenzo Galilei's lost settings of the Lamentations for Holy Week and a scene from Dante, and Laura Guidiccioni's three pastorals set to music, also lost, by Emilio de' Cavalieri.



'Descent of Rhythm and Harmony', the sixth intermedio in the...

Nevertheless, a full account of how opera came into existence and how it came to take precisely the form it did needs to consider a number of other 16th-century developments, among them: (1) the history of music in erudite comedy, and especially the nature and role of the *intermedi*, the musical compositions, sometimes sung to the accompaniment of stage action or dancing, that closed each act (see [fig.1](#)); (2) the nature of music in 16th-century tragedies, and especially of the choruses that divided the scenes; (3) the debate about genres that engrossed literary circles in 16th-century Italy, and especially the debate about the nature of the pastoral, since pastoral eclogues served as a principal model (perhaps the principal model) for the earliest

operas; and (4) the nature of the other kinds of music written for staged or semi-staged presentation at courts, academies, civic celebrations and the like – shorter staged scenes and dialogues that have no agreed-upon generic designation, although they were widespread in 16th-century Italy. In addition, we should take into account not only the activities of court musicians and singers, and those employed as musicians to members of the highest reaches of society, but also *commedia dell'arte* players who fulfilled an important though not as yet completely understood function in the history of Italian musical theatre.

Aside from the few songs introduced naturalistically into the plots of various plays, music in 16th-century erudite comedy consisted mainly of madrigals (or in some cases instrumental music), which closed each act. At some performances the musicians were hidden behind the stage, but more often they appeared on stage to sing and sometimes to dance. In many cases, these *intermedi* did nothing more than mark the passing of time, as in Verdelot's

intermedi madrigals for Machiavelli's *La Mandragola* and *La Clizia*, one of the very few sets of normal madrigalesque *intermedito* survive (some of the same music served for both plays). In many cases, the madrigals used as *intermedi* may not have been written specifically for that purpose (or at least not for particular plays or performances); it sufficed that the texts dealt with approximately the right subject matter. There seems not to have been a particular theatrical style that distinguished these madrigals from others, but it is difficult to be precise about this, since so little music survives for the texts that appear in many play books.



'Descent of Rhythm and Harmony', the sixth intermedio in the...

For great occasions, and especially weddings within the Medici family in Florence, more elaborate *intermedi* were staged between the acts of a play. In these courtly *intermedi*, several musical compositions were performed between the acts, and they were accompanied by stage action, including elaborate machines and dancing. Detailed descriptions of some of these grand occasions were published, and at least two sets of partbooks include the music composed especially for the events: those commemorating the wedding in 1539 of Cosimo I de' Medici with Eleonora of Toledo, and those commemorating the wedding in 1589 of Ferdinando I de' Medici with Christine of Lorraine (see [fig. 1](#)). Courtly *intermedi* did not have plots, but many of them were centred

on a common theme, often pastoral or mythological in character. Grand courtly *intermedi* were the most impressive examples of musical theatre of the 16th century.

The most famous and probably the most elaborate *intermedi* of the entire century were those organized for the Medici wedding of 1589, performed between the acts of Girolamo Bargagli's comedy *La pellegrina*. They were devised by Count de' Bardi around the theme of the power of music in the ancient world (the subject of many discussions of the Camerata), directed by Cavalieri, and composed by Peri, Caccini, Marenzio and other composers of the Medici circle. The 1589 performance was a seminal event for the history of musical theatre, even though the music itself did not differ in character very much from regular madrigals or lighter Italian secular forms. The six *intermedi* were sung throughout, mostly by soloists – including Peri and Caccini – and the third of them, treating the story of Apollo and the python, is a direct precursor of the first opera, *Dafne*, a decade later. But the music of 1589 does not represent any advance towards an operatic style, that is, a kind of music appropriate for setting dramatic dialogue.

Whereas the *intermedi* have been well studied and performed, music for 16th-century tragedies is much less well known, at least partly because so little of it survives, and partly because the surviving music, notably Andrea Gabrieli's music for *Edipo tiranno* (Orsatto Giustiniani's adaptation of the *Oedipus* of Sophocles), which opened the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza in 1585, seems so unimpressive. Virtually every 16th-century tragedy includes long choruses to divide the action, and 16th-century commentators seem to make a distinction between these sorts of chorus and *intermedi*. To judge from Gabrieli's example, choruses for tragedies were set to a music simple enough to allow the words to be heard easily by the audience. However, producers and composers devised various solutions to the problem of an appropriate music for tragedy – an example is Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* produced in London in 1562 – and in many cases may have organized music indistinguishable from that appropriate for *intermedi*.

The role of music in tragedy, comedy and pastoral (the three principal dramatic genres of the late 16th century) was discussed by a number of writers on dramatic theory and practice in the 16th and 17th centuries, notably Leone de' Sommi (B1556), Angelo Ingegneri (B1598), the anonymous author of *Il corago* (Bc1630) and G.B. Doni (B1630). Sommi and Ingegneri wrote mostly about *intermedi* and tragic choruses with some consideration of incidental music, *Il corago* and Doni about operatic works. Whereas the author of *Il corago* wished to offer advice about how best to compose and produce opera, Doni, as an antiquarian concerned about the nature of music in ancient Greek and Roman theatre, criticized the new genre on the grounds (among other things) of monotony and lack of verisimilitude and advocated instead a judicious mixture of speech and song, the song reserved chiefly for monologues and choruses.

Such discussions of dramatic practice took place against a longstanding literary debate about genres, and especially about the propriety of the new mixed genres of tragicomedy and pastoral, unknown to Aristotle and hence suspect in the eyes of 16th-century intellectuals, debates chronicled in Weinberg's magisterial study of literary criticism in the Italian Renaissance (B1961). The new pastoral drama, including such famous literary landmarks as Agostino Beccari's *Il sacrificio: favola pastorale* (1555), Tasso's *Aminta: favola boscareccia* (1573) and Guarini's *Il pastor fido: tragicomedia pastorale* (written c1580–85), made use of an unusually large amount of music. *Il sacrificio*, for example, included a scene in which priests chanted in a kind of recitative and were answered by a chorus (only the vocal part of a fragment of the music, by Alfonso dalla Viola, survives); and *Il pastor fido* included a famous blind-man's-buff scene (the so-called 'Giuoco della cieca') with singing and dancing.

These plays are important precursors of opera, since discussions about them overlapped and intersected with the discussions that led to the first operas. Certainly the first operas came about partly as a result of debate about the kind of music most appropriate for the pastoral genre. The pastoral plays like those listed above did not, however, serve as models for the earliest operatic librettos. The first operas, instead, seem to have been modelled on the much shorter pastoral eclogues, of 500–700 verses, which put into dramatic (and usually amorous) conflict shepherds and shepherdesses, nymphs and satyrs and gods and goddesses. Most eclogues are quite static dramatically and evidently derive from the long tradition of courtly entertainment. In truth, though, the study of the literary climate in Italy in the late 16th century, and of genres and debates about genre, has hardly been exhausted, especially as these questions relate to music and musicians.

The staged entertainments that had enlivened court life (and also academic and civic life) for centuries provided yet another contributing element to the diverse mixture of traditions and genres that established the character of early opera. *Mascherate* and *moresche* already had a venerable history by the second half of the 16th century. Entertainments in which masked singers and dancers interrupted a banquet or a ball are described by various chroniclers from at least the 14th century. In the late 16th century, short tableaux were sometimes offered as entertainment in upper-class society. They are called by a variety of names (including *morescha* and *mascherata* but also *favola pastorale*, *favola*, *ballo* or simply *fiesta*, among others); there is no generic descriptive term for such entertainments. Madrigal comedies, for example, surely belong in this category, especially since it has been shown (by M. Farahat, *EMH*, x, 1991, pp.123–43) that some of these cycles of polyphonic madrigals, canzonettas and villanellas were actually staged in private rooms. (Many madrigal comedies include characters and dramatic situations derived from *commedia dell'arte*; most of them were written for performance in academies.) More squarely in the tradition of courtly entertainments, though, were the three scenes by Laura Guidiccioni, including the blind-man's-buff scene from *Il pastor fido*, set to music, now lost, by Cavalieri, performed in Florence in the 1590s; or the shorter dramatic works of Monteverdi like *Il ballo delle ingrate*, *Tirsi e Clori* and the *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*.

Opera can thus be seen as a genre that grew out of literary discussion in high society. But another tradition that went into making opera, that of the *commedia dell'arte*, should not be excluded from consideration (as Pirrotta, *Li due Orfei*, has pointed out). During the second half of the 16th century, several professional acting troupes toured Italy, performing not only their own special repertory of improvised or semi-improvised plays with stock characters but also written comedies and other kinds of play. Although scholars have been inclined to characterize *commedia dell'arte* players as only semi-literate artisans, the truth is that many of the actors were highly educated, highly literate and highly musical. Isabella Andreini, for example, the leading lady of the troupe called I Gelosi, was a poet, author of a pastoral eclogue, member of an academy and an accomplished linguist and musician; and Monteverdi's first Ariadne in his mostly lost opera *Arianna* (1608) was an actor. Moreover, *commedia dell'arte* plays influenced the form and style of some opera librettos towards the middle of the 17th century (Bianconi and Walker, C(i)1975), and troupes of professional actors sometimes performed opera. Closer investigation is needed of the musical orientation of the *commedia dell'arte* players in general and their connection with opera in particular.

There was a vast amount of dramatic music heard in Italy in the 16th century, and a large literature of debate and discussion about it. All this activity contributed to musicians' ideas of what an appropriate music for the theatre should be. The crucial change from courtly entertainment to opera came about when a kind of music appropriate for dramatic dialogue was invented, by Caccini, Cavalieri, Vincenzo Galilei or Peri (all of them claimed credit). The overall shape of the earliest operas, *Dafne* and the two *Euridice* settings (as well as Monteverdi's *Orfeo*), was deeply influenced by earlier traditions, at least in that scene divisions were closed off by large *intermedi* choruses; and their subject matter was determined after extensive literary debate about genre, ancient history and the nature of music's power.

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Opera (i), §III: Early opera, 1600–90

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Opera (i), §III: Early opera, 1600–90

III. Early opera, 1600–90

Opera in the 17th century developed in three phases. The first, humanist court opera (1600–35), closely linked to Italian Renaissance traditions of court entertainment, was played out in the aristocratic palaces of Florence, Mantua and Rome. The second, *dramma per musica* (1637–c.1680), defined by the generic subtitle that became current in librettos at mid-century, was staged in the public theatres of Venice. In the third, European spectacle (1650–90), which overlapped the second and involved the dissemination of the new genre throughout Italy and across the Alps, *dramma per musica* adapted to local political and social conditions, in theatres both public and private.

Contemporary critical commentary effectively articulated the aesthetic principles of the art and helps to distinguish the various phases of its development. Writing at the end of the first phase, G.B. Doni (*Trattato della musica scenica*, B1630) and especially the anonymous author of *Il corago* (Bc.1630) explored the basic issue of verisimilitude raised by the requirement of speaking in song ('recitar cantando') and offered guidelines for the choice of appropriate subject matter (pastoral), characters (gods, musicians) and poetic style (variety of metres, *versi sciolti*). The Jesuit priest G.D. Ottonelli (*Cristiana moderazione del teatro*, 1652) distinguished the different phases by their patronage and implied function: the aristocratic phase 'performed in the palaces of great princes and other secular or ecclesiastical lords ... or produced sometimes by certain gentlemen or talented citizens or learned academicians' and the 'commercial productions of a musical and dramatic nature put on by professional musicians', who performed in public theatres. Finally, the Dalmatian canon Cristoforo Ivanovich, in *Memorie teatrali di Venezia* (1681), a treatise devoted exclusively to the development of public opera in Venice, epitomized its relation to court opera in socio-economic terms: 'Venetian theatres are in no way inferior to those supported by princes, except that in those enjoyment depends on the prince's generosity, whereas in these it is a matter of business'.

1. Humanist court opera.

(i) Florence.



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Humanist opera emerged around 1600 in Florence as the culmination of a series of spectacular entertainments designed to celebrate the dynastic image of the Medici, most famously the wedding *intermedi* of 1589 (**fig.1**), in which almost all the figures associated with the first operas were involved: Giovanni de' Bardi as stage director, who organized the entertainment and composed one chorus, Emilio de' Cavalieri as musical director and choreographer, who wrote some of the music, Ottavio Rinuccini, author of most of the text, and the composers Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini, who sang in the production and contributed one number apiece. These were among the participants in the academic discussions establishing the aesthetic premises of the new art. Beginning in the 1560s in the Accademia degli Alterati and continuing for several decades, first in Bardi's so-called Camerata and then at the palace of Jacopo Corsi, their discussions investigated the nature of ancient tragedy and the contribution of music to its legendary effect. Their aim was to re-create a modern, wholly sung drama that was comparable in power and intensity.

The *Euridice* of Peri and Rinuccini, performed in the Pitti Palace in 1600 as part of the festivities celebrating the marriage of Maria de' Medici and Henri IV, stands as the first monument of operatic history (though Caccini's setting of the same libretto, part of which was incorporated in the performance, was in fact published first). Peri and Rinuccini had actually collaborated with Corsi some years earlier on a similar work, *Dafne*, which was designed, in Rinuccini's words, 'to show what our new music could do'. Evidently begun as early as 1594, but not performed until 1598, this *Dafne* was never published, and as a result only a few excerpts have survived; but one of them exemplifies the recitative style that was Peri's major contribution to the developing genre. The publication of Caccini's and Peri's scores of *Euridice* within a couple of months in 1600, along with that of a musical drama by Cavalieri, *Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo*, the prefaces of all three claiming priority, indicates the intensity of the rivalry during these years.

Both *Dafne* and *Euridice*, called *favole*, are Ovidian pastorals, ideally suited to demonstrating the power of the new music. Beyond portraying a world and an age in which 'music was natural and speech almost poetic' (Doni), each features a mythic musician as hero: for both Apollo and his son, Orpheus, singing is a natural means of expression.

The most important stylistic innovation of *Euridice* was recitative: a 'harmony surpassing that of ordinary speech but falling so far below the melody of song as to take an intermediate form', in Peri's famous description. Flexible enough to follow the form of the text as well as its expression, the *stile recitativo* allowed the characters to seem as if they were speaking naturally. Rinuccini's poetry inspired the *stile recitativo*, with its almost prosaic *versi sciolti*, interrupted on occasion by more highly structured passages, sometimes strophic, in a variety of poetic metres. Such passages, mostly for chorus but also in the allegorical prologue for Tragedy, became the poetic basis of the opera aria.

Within the remarkable expressive range of Peri's recitative – from Daphne's chilling narrative account of Eurydice's death to Orpheus's poignant lament and solemn formal prayer – dramatic verisimilitude is enhanced by the close adherence of the music to the emotional contours of Rinuccini's text. All three instances became emblematic for the operas that followed.

(ii) Mantua.

Operas continued to be presented in Florence over the course of the next several decades, interspersed with *intermedi*, ballets and tournaments. But the real centre of operatic activity shifted, albeit briefly, to Mantua, long a musical rival of Medici Florence. Sponsored by the reigning Gonzaga duke, Vincenzo, another operatic rendition of the Orpheus myth was performed in his palace in 1607 before the Accademia degli Invaghiti. This *Orfeo*, by the court composer Claudio Monteverdi, on a libretto by the court secretary Alessandro Striggio, was clearly inspired by its Florentine predecessor. It emphasizes the same dramatic moments – including the narration of Eurydice's death and Orpheus's subsequent lament and prayer – but Monteverdi's music embraces a far wider affective vocabulary than Peri's. Recitative is interspersed much more liberally with song and dance. *Orfeo* also places much greater emphasis on formal elements: strophes, refrains and larger symmetrical structures, extending to entire acts and even the opera as a whole, create a sense of musical coherence and shape missing in the earlier score. And the famously elaborate orchestra, with its paired violins, harps and other instruments and rich continuo – more akin to that of the Florentine *intermedi* than Peri's opera – plays a crucial role in creating musical variety.

Two further operatic landmarks appeared in Mantua in 1608, in conjunction with the wedding of Francesco Gonzaga and Marguerite of Savoy: Marco da Gagliano's setting of a revision of Rinuccini's *Dafne* (published 1608) and Monteverdi's *Arianna* on a new Rinuccini libretto – the first musical 'tragedia', so called because its principal characters are of royal birth and their actions are politically motivated (*PirrottaDO*). The only surviving music is Ariadne's long recitative lament on the departure of Theseus, reported to have moved the audience to tears; Monteverdi's own publication of this music in various forms, the many contemporary manuscript copies and numerous imitations in subsequent operas attest its power and significance. In its ideal meshing of textual and musical rhetoric, it represents the acme of the recitative style.

(iii) Rome.

Although operas, along with other kinds of musical entertainment, continued to be performed in Mantua during the next decades, the centre of operatic activity shifted once again, this time to Rome. Drawing on more varied sources of patronage – aristocratic families and religious organizations as well as the papacy – opera developed very differently here. These differences are already evident in Cavalieri's *Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo* (1600), credited

with being the first wholly sung drama in Rome. A moralizing allegory performed during Lent at the oratory of S Maria in Vallicella, it is more relevant to the history of the oratorio than to that of opera.

Sung dramas of various kinds, sharing little with one another aside from a moralizing ethos and a solo style of minimal expressive power, continued to appear sporadically during the next two decades in a variety of venues, secular and religious. Of greatest historical significance was the 'favola boschereccia' *La catena d'Adone* (1626), Domenico Mazzocchi's setting of a libretto by Ottavio Tronsarelli based on Marino's sensational epic of 1623, *Adone*. Purporting to illustrate the sufferings of the human soul when it wanders from God, Mazzocchi's only opera was published with a preface in which, addressing the problems raised by the stylistic dichotomy inherent in early opera, the composer acknowledges the tediousness of recitative and introduces the concept of 'mezz'arie' as an antidote. Accordingly, the score is filled with brief lyrical passages, neither aria nor recitative, that were later called arioso.

The election of Maffeo Barberini to the papacy in 1623 as Urban VIII brought new regularity to operatic activities, promoted by the papal nephews, Francesco, Taddeo and later Antonio Barberini, and their colleague Giulio Rospigliosi, the future Pope Clement IX. They fostered a series of operatic productions for Carnival at their palaces, eventually in the huge (4000-seats, it is claimed) theatre within the Palazzo alle Quattro Fontane. All the librettos were by Rospigliosi, drawing either from lives of the saints, such as *Sant'Alessio* by Stefano Landi (1631 or 1632, published 1634), or from Renaissance literary sources: *Erminia sul Giordano*, by Michelangelo Rossi, from Tasso, (1633, published 1637); Virgilio Mazzocchi and Marco Marazzoli's *Chi soffre speri*, from Boccaccio (1637); and Luigi Rossi's *Il palazzo incantato*, from Ariosto (1642). The Barberini-Rospigliosi operas were lavish spectacles with political and dynastic intent, glorifying Rome and their patrons.

2. 'Dramma per musica'

The death of Urban VIII in 1644 brought the spectacular Barberini era to a close, and with it the effective end of humanist court opera. Nearly a decade earlier, a new kind of opera had begun to emerge in Venice.

Venetian opera reflected the distinctive traditions and oligarchical structure of the Most Serene Republic. Performed during Carnival in theatres owned by patrician families competing for prestige – the Tron, Grimani, Vendramin and Giustinian – before a ticket-buying public, opera in Venice was a business, as Ivanovich noted: a big business. Theatre owners contracted with impresarios or production companies that supplied operas or commissioned them; they also provided or hired musicians and other workers. Initially librettists and/or composers themselves acted as impresarios (Ferrari, Cavalli, Giovanni Faustini), but eventually the role was filled by entrepreneurs who devoted their full time to the increasingly complex negotiations involved in opera production (Marco Faustini, Francesco Santurini). The continuity and frequency of performance promoted by regular demand and dependable financial backing ensured the institutionalization that characterizes opera today.

What started as an experiment in 1637 with a performance of *Andromeda* at the Teatro S Cassiano by a Rome-based itinerant troupe, directed by Benedetto Ferrari, blossomed within a few short years into a full-blown industry. Both foreign and local talent were exploited to satisfy increasing demand for librettists, composers, stage designers and performers. Monteverdi, lured out of operatic retirement, produced his three last masterpieces, *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* (1640), *Le nozze d'Enea e Lavinia* (1641, lost) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1643, with the collaboration of several other composers), for Venetian theatres. His S Marco colleague Francesco Cavalli became the most prolific composer of the period, producing 28 operas over a 30-year career. By 1641, audiences could see multiple performances of as many as eight different operas during a season that lasted approximately six weeks in four different theatres. (There were nine by the end of the century, although the number of open theatres varied from two or three during the 1650s and 60s to five or six later.)

One important theatre not under patrician family control, the Novissimo, was specially built for a group of noble academicians, the Incogniti (who included the important early librettists G.F. Busenello and Giulio Strozzi), whose public-relations efforts in pamphlets and libretto prefaces were fundamental to the establishment of the new genre. Their inaugural effort, *La finta pazzo* (Strozzi and Francesco Saccati), designed by the architect-turned-scenographer Giacomo Torelli, and featuring the Roman diva Anna Renzi, became the most famous opera of the period. As the most frequent Venetian export, it epitomized *dramma per musica* throughout Italy.

Opera achieved commercial viability through a combination of popular appeal and efficiency of production. Subject matter drawn from topics relevant to Venetian audiences ranged from the legends of Troy (regarded as part of the mythic history of the republic) to the exploits of imperial Roman heroes that could serve as exemplars for modern Venetians at war with the Turk. Librettos included pointed references to Venetian social customs – courtesans,

gondoliers, even public opera itself – and, asides addressed directly to the audience that bridged the gap between fictional and real worlds. And the city itself was explicitly praised in prologues and depicted in scenic backdrops.

Orchestras were small (normally just strings and continuo), roles were doubled, the chorus was eschewed and a broad range of variable conventions facilitated the mass production of operas. Operatic structure was standardized at a prologue and three acts. Plots, whether drawn from myth, epic or history or newly invented, focussed on two pairs of noble lovers, attended by various comic servants, who are separated and then reunited. Recitative in *versi sciolti* was interspersed with closed-form arias in a single metre and/or with a regular rhyme scheme. Musico-dramatic scene types included the sleep scene with lullaby, the mad scene, the incantation (in *versi sdruciolli*) and the lament (on a descending tetrachord bass); vocal types included castrato heroes, bass fathers and *travesti* nurses.

Essentially established through the collaboration of Cavalli and his first regular librettist, Giovanni Faustini, which produced ten operas in as many years (1642–52), these conventions were easily adapted by other composers and librettists and remained in place to the end of the century. Certain individuals stand out for their accomplished treatment or extension of the conventions: the librettists G.A. Cicognini, Nicolò Minato, Aurelio Aureli and Matteo Noris; the composers Antonio Cesti, Giovanni Boretti, Antonio Sartorio and Giovanni Legrenzi. Nevertheless, the conventions ensured a continuity of style that minimized differences between particular composers and librettists.

Changes, as the century progressed, reflected developing audience expectations. Singers assumed increasing prominence (reflected by the rise in their salaries in comparison with those of composers). Distinctions between recitative and aria, blurred for expressive reasons in Monteverdi's and Cavalli's works, became clearer. Arias increased in length as well as number from around a dozen in the 1640s to more than 60 in the 1670s, with the musical form *ABA* (eventually developing into the *da capo* aria) gradually superseding *ABB*. Increasingly, plots became filled with improbable occurrences as sources were stretched to the point where nothing but the original title survived. More and more, serious and comic elements became intermingled. These developments were condemned by contemporary critics as pandering to the lower elements in the audience, a trend hastened in 1674 by a radical reduction in ticket prices introduced at one of the theatres (the S Moisè), which increased business but reduced the funds available for productions.

Besides forcing competing theatres to follow suit, this move inspired the opening of two new theatres, one of which, S Giovanni Grisostomo, surpassed all the others in magnificence. Since its owners, the Grimani family, were firmly opposed to the newly popular style, it alone maintained higher prices – and spectacular scenography – and it became a symbol of the restoration of decorum. Towards the end of the century it became a Venetian outpost of the Roman Accademia degli Arcadi, a forum for operatic reform.

3. European spectacle.

(i) Beyond Venice: the Italian peninsula.

Once established in Venice, opera began to be exported beyond the lagoon – first by Ferrari's itinerant troupe, then by others (Febiarmonici, Accademici Discordati). *Dramma per musica* became the dominant form of theatrical entertainment throughout Italy and even north of the Alps, though delayed or modified, in some cities, by particular local traditions. *La finta pazzaw* was heard in nearly a dozen cities, including Paris, during the period 1644–52 (see fig.2 [not available online]). After the middle of the century *Giasone* (Cicognini, Cavalli) saw 20 or more different productions, the latest in 1690.

The conventionalized but open structure of the model offered ample scope for modification to suit different audiences and performing conditions. In Medici Florence, the influential librettist G.A. Moniglia adapted the Venetian model to traditional courtly functions: Cavalli's *Hipermestra* celebrated a royal birth in 1658, Jacopo Melani's *Ercole in Tebe* a wedding in 1661. Both were performed at the Teatro della Pergola under the auspices of the Medici-sponsored Accademia degli Immobili, which concurrently presented a series of indigenous comic operas (also setting Moniglia librettos) that exploited local customs and dialect. Meanwhile another, more bourgeois academy, the Sorgenti, hosted a series of Venetian imports at its own commercial theatre, the Cocomero.

In Naples, beginning in 1651, Venetian imports were adapted to celebrate the Spanish viceroy, both at the palace theatre, S Carlo, and at S Bartolomeo, a public theatre opened in 1654. In Rome, *dramma per musica* never really took hold. Except for the brief period 1671–4, when a series of modified Venetian imports were staged at the Tordinona, a public opera house licensed under Pope Clement IX (Rospigliosi) and patronized by Queen Christina,

operas continued to be produced privately, and intermittently, under the sponsorship of various noble families. They fall into two distinct categories. The first, derived from contemporary Spanish cloak-and-sword comedy, included two in the 1650s by A.M. Abbadini and Marco Marazzoli on Rospigliosi librettos, and several in the 1670s and 80s by Bernardo Pasquini and the young Alessandro Scarlatti. The second, in a simplified style, was based on pastoral subjects, representing the nascent Arcadian movement (including various works by Scarlatti, on librettos by Antonio Crapece, G.D. de Totis, Silvio Stampiglia and Cardinal Ottoboni): this genre soon made itself felt in Venice as well.

The impact of *dramma per musica* north of the Alps, whether imported, imitated, adapted or rejected and replaced, depended on the social structures of the receiving country. Developments in France can be regarded as a reaction against it: a brief period of imports was followed by strenuous efforts to replace it with a national style which, however, borrowed elements from it. German-speaking countries hosted it longest, developing an indigenous tradition quite late. In contrast, England and Spain remained virtually untouched by *dramma per musica*, insulated from its influence by their own distinctive traditions of theatrical music.

(ii) France.

As part of the italianization of the French court promoted by Cardinal Mazarin, the first operas in Paris were Italian imports (six in the years 1645–62), either designed or modified to suit French taste. Thus Paris was depicted in the scenic backdrop of *La finta pazzo*, and in Cavalli's *Xerse* (1660) the 'unnatural' castrato hero was recast as a baritone and the three acts were turned into five, interspersed with the elaborate ballets – by the young Lully – traditionally beloved by the French. Two Italian operas written expressly for the French court, Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo* (1647) and Cavalli's *Ercole amante* (1662), featured, in addition to the obligatory ballets, elaborate political prologues and epilogues in praise of the monarch. In the latter, commissioned for the wedding of Louis XIV and the Infanta of Spain, the king himself appeared in several of the ballets, as Pluto, Mars and, of course, the Sun: a vivid instance of patronage made visible.

Following the death of Mazarin, *dramma per musica* was rejected in favour of a national style that represented a synthesis of French traditions and tastes. Nonetheless, the Italian genre left some significant traces, not only the concept of wholly sung drama itself but in conventions such as the *sommeil* (based on the ubiquitous sleep scene and the magnificent large-scale chaconne movements that united singers, players and dancers (based on the musical idea that underpinned the Italian lament).

The development and persistence of a national style of French opera are owed to the specific programme established by royal patronage and the vision and talents of the figure eventually charged with carrying it out. Through the establishment of the Académie Royale de Musique (or Opéra), in 1672 the king granted a monopoly for the production of opera in French to his Florentine-born *surintendant de la musique*, Jean-Baptiste Lully. Lully succeeded in creating a distinctive national opera, following a similar but abortive attempt by Pierre Perrin and Robert Cambert, and drawing on his experience as a composer in other theatrical genres, especially *comédies* and *tragédies-ballets*.

Together with his librettist Philippe Quinault, Lully managed to incorporate the most characteristic elements of earlier genres – elaborate ballets, marvellous scenic transformations ('le merveilleux'), luxuriant divertissements of songs and dances – within a context responsive to the strong traditions of spoken theatre and the French requirement for verisimilitude: the *tragédie lyrique* or, as it was initially called, *tragédie en musique*. Based either on mythology (*Cadmus*, *Atys*) or on chivalric legend (*Roland*, *Armide*; see fig.35 below), all 13 of Lully's *tragédies* feature an amorous aristocratic couple disturbed by one or more rivals (which often include a deity), with a parallel plot involving characters of lower rank. They reflect contemporary spoken tragedy in their five-act structure, adherence to the Aristotelian unities (*pace* Boileau and other critics), the preservation of *liaisons de scènes*, the delegation of tragic events to messengers' reports and the use of the chorus for commentary and as participant in the action as well as for decoration. Verisimilitude is maintained through reliance on *récitatif ordinaire* and brief, syllabic continuo *airs* for dialogue, permitting a natural, speech-like declamation of text. More substantial *airs* with orchestral accompaniment expressive of feelings are reserved for soliloquies. Musical contrast and opulence are provided by instrumental movements, various conventional scene types, ballets and, of course, the divertissements – all of this enhanced by Lully's renowned orchestra and the visual marvels provided by the scenographer Carlo Vigarani.

The lengthy season (49 weeks), the frequent performances (at least three a week), the steady supply of new works and repeated revivals of old ones over a period of 15 years assured the continuity of the *tragédie lyrique* well beyond Lully's death in 1687. The publication of Lully's oeuvre, beginning in 1679, essentially established a national repertory and a permanent tradition. His successors, among them Pascal Collasse, Henry Desmarests, André Campra, André-Cardinal Destouches and Marin Marais, relied upon revivals of his works to attract audiences to the opera.

Comparisons between French and Italian opera agitated critics in both countries from the late 17th century onwards. After taking its lead from Italy in the 1640s, France reciprocated by influencing the Arcadian reform of Italian opera in the 1690s.

(iii) The German-speaking lands: Vienna and Hamburg.

The *dramma per musica* enjoyed greater longevity and influence in German-speaking lands than anywhere else; in essence, the taste for it inhibited the development of a native tradition. Vienna and Innsbruck were rather like Venetian outposts, where newly created works were literally interchangeable with those produced in Venice itself. In Vienna, under the guidance of Leopold I (1657–1705), the genre was adapted to courtly service, becoming more decorative, elaborate and visibly expensive, with plots designed to allude to the heroic exploits of the ruling dynasty. Under long-term contracts, a stable of Italian composers (including Antonio Cesti, M.A. Ziani, G.F. Sances and Antonio Bertali) and poets (Francesco Sbarra, Nicolò Minato) and the scenographer Ludovico Burnacini supplied between six and ten theatrical entertainments annually, including operas, to celebrate imperial birthdays and namedays and special occasions such as court visits. One of the most elaborate of them was Cesti's *fiesta teatrale, Il pomo d'oro*, on a Sbarra libretto; planned to cap the two-year-long celebration of the emperor's marriage to Margherita, Infanta of Spain, it was finally performed in 1668, over two days. Antonio Draghi, librettist (from 1658), composer (from 1662) and superintendent (after 1674), was responsible for more than 170 of these works between 1662 and 1699.

The genre flourished for a briefer period (1654–65) at Innsbruck, under the auspices of the archduke, where an Italian company directed by his *maestro di cappella*, Cesti, produced operas in the specially constructed Venetian-style theatre. This was the first independent opera house in German-speaking lands. Several operas originating in Innsbruck and Vienna were subsequently revived in Venice and became widely known throughout Italy.

Vernacular operas by native composers were few, and most of the scores are lost, famous among them Heinrich Schütz's *Dafne*, setting a translation of the Rinuccini libretto by Martin Opitz (1627). S.T. Staden's *Seelewig* (1644; see [STADEN, SIGMUND THEOPHIL, fig.](#)), the first 'German' opera of which the music is extant, is actually more of a moral allegory. J.C. Kerll's *Oronte* (1657) inaugurated the Munich opera house, which, like most German opera houses, was built to perform Italian opera (Munich and Hanover under Agostino Steffani, Dresden under G.A. Bontempi and Carlo Pallavicino).

The significant exception was the Theater am Gänsemarkt in Hamburg, established in 1678 by a group of citizens who invested their capital for the purpose of producing opera in German. As profits depended on income from box rental and ticket sales, operas were staged not seasonally but throughout the year. The house opened with Johann Theile's *Adam und Eva*, based, like many subsequent works, on a biblical story. While most of the librettos were by local poets, some were translations of Venetian texts, set to new music. Like Venice, Hamburg was a prosperous, cosmopolitan and independent commercial centre. It was to become especially important for the development of German opera, with the works of Mattheson, Keiser and Handel.

(iv) England.

Both *dramma per musica* and *tragédie lyrique* were known in England. Cavalli's *Erismena*, which survives in a contemporary English translation, may have been performed in London in 1674, and Lully's *Cadmus* was performed in 1686. But wholly sung drama never established a foothold. Factors militating against it include a strong dramatic tradition in which music played no more than an incidental role, and a competing tradition of celebrating royal events with elaborate masques that combined music, dance and scenic spectacle. Both genres provided satisfying musical and dramatic entertainment without raising questions of the propriety of sung dialogue.

Nevertheless, the recitative style made an early appearance in Ben Jonson's masque *Lovers Made Men*, set to music (lost) by Nicholas Lanier (1617), and in William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656; see [LONDON, fig.12](#)), said to be the first English opera, which was set completely to music by a team comprising Henry Lawes, Henry Cooke and Matthew Locke (vocal music), and Charles Coleman and George Hudson (instrumental music). French influence, encouraged by Charles II, eager to re-create the court opera he had experienced during his recent exile in Paris, is evident in the so-called semi-operas of Locke (*Macbeth*, 1664, *The Tempest*, 1674, and *Psyche*, 1675). As in Lully's *comédies-ballets*, music is reserved for magic, ceremonial and spectacle. There is even in one full-scale English *tragédie lyrique*, *Albion and Albanus*, a Dryden libretto set by the French-trained composer Louis Grabu in 1685.

The French style permeates the two most exceptional all-sung works of the period, John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (c1683) and Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), his only opera. Though the knowledge of French and Italian opera did not increase the incidence of continuously sung drama, both styles influenced Purcell. Dryden called Purcell's late semi-operas 'our English operas'; his own *King Arthur* (1691) was among them. They contain numerous recitatives, lament arias and ostinatos. Purcell achieved full characterization through music, however, only in *Dido and Aeneas*.

(v) Spain.

Despite strong cultural ties with Italy and the presence of a large contingent of Italian theatre men – including Rospigliosi as papal nuncio for 11 years, as well as several Florentine theatrical architects – Italian opera made little headway in Spain. Like England, Spain already had strong indigenous traditions of theatrical music and a vital heritage of spoken theatre which with Calderón and Lope de Vega reached its golden age in this period. Spectacle plays, zarzuelas, semi-operas and *comédias* featuring songs, dances and even some recitative dialogue in a distinctively native style served the same political and social functions as opera in other European courts: the glorification of the monarchy.

Three full-sung operas are known; they were motivated by particular political considerations and performed in the royal palace at Madrid under the patronage of Philip IV. The first, Lope de Vega's *La selva sin amor* (1627), composed by the Italians Filippo Piccinini and Bernardo Monanni, was promoted by a group of Florentine residents at court, as part of a plot to exert Italian influence on Philip IV. The other two, Calderón's *La púrpura de la rosa* and *Celos aun del aire matan* (both probably composed in 1660), reflected a desire to compete with Mazarin in celebrating the peace treaty with France and the coming marriage of the infanta and Louis XIV. But these were anomalies, and of the three works only the music of *Celos aun del aire matan* by Juan Hidalgo has survived. Hidalgo probably also composed *La púrpura de la rosa*.

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Opera (i), §IV: The 18th century

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Opera (i), §IV: The 18th century

IV. The 18th century

1. Views of 18th-century opera.

Any attempt at a chronological survey of an art form implies that there is a continuity in that art which outlasts periods. Such a continuity may well be questioned in the case of opera: at the beginning of the 18th century, it was still a form of Italian or French literary theatre recited musically; at the end of the century, it had been transformed into a musical species of art, common to all Europe. It is of course possible to trace an evolutionary connection between the beginning and the end of 18th-century opera, particularly if the account focusses on the history of opera as composition. That historiographical convention, however, imposes an artificial unity on the subject. If 18th-century opera is conceivable as a whole, then it is only as a multivalent concept where the interactions of music, drama, social function and other factors are subject to changing contexts, defying the boundaries of academic disciplines.

The field of reference for a study of 18th-century opera will vary according to how opera is defined. To see it primarily as a musical art involves marginalizing much 18th-century theatre where the musical ingredient consisted only of borrowed songs (French vaudeville comedies, English ballad operas, plays with songs and incidental music); if it is a theatrical art, much unstaged dramatic music must be excluded (cantatas, serenatas, concert arias). The understanding of opera as an exclusively secular genre would rule out the sacred operas of the period (*dramma sacro*); and opera histories that include independent melodramas (Wieland, Schweitzer) or staged ballets (Starzer/Hilverding, Gluck/Angiolini) do not even require opera to be sung. There is also the question of whether opera is to be regarded as a 'work' (opus) or a practice.

The 18th-century development has tended towards the concept of opera as both a work and a practice that presents 'sung action on stage'. This definition is fragile: when modified to 'singing and acting on stage', it would cover practically any theatrical performance of the time. The term 'opera' itself, widely adopted by the end of the century, originally had alternative meanings (for example a *commedia dell'arte* performance). The names for sub-genres were either literary (*tragédie en musique*, *dramma per musica*, *commedia per musica* and others) or colloquial (*opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *opéra comique* and others). Thus the colloquial term 'opera' seems to have implied the musical ingredient anyway, whereas it had to be specially added to the literary terms ('... per musica'). It was this colloquial Italian term that was adopted in most countries, occasionally competing with native terms (Singspiel, zarzuela).

The period under consideration, c.1690–1790, privileges *opera seria* as a paradigmatic sub-genre, since it formed a relative unity in these 100 years and had an international dissemination typical for this time. From a purely national perspective, or in comic opera, the years 1690–1790 would hardly appear so unified. In French opera, for example, two events described by contemporaries as 'revolutions' were the establishment of full-blown *opéra comique* in the 1750s and the structural changes brought about by Gluck, Piccinni and others from 1774 onwards; works representative of both types remained in the repertory until 1830 and after.

A study of 18th-century opera must take account of other forms of theatre of the time, to help an understanding of operatic music itself (for example in its gestural functions) and to place opera in its literary and theatrical context. The history of literature overlaps most extensively with that of opera; the texts and dramatic contents of opera are important, not least because the genre addresses non-musicians as well as musicians. On the other hand, musical

dramaturgy was widely seen as exempt from the rules and aesthetic precepts of the literary theatre, just as musical poetry is often more appreciated when sung than when recited.

In the narratives of cultural history, the 18th century seems to cross a major division or watershed, from whatever standpoint it is viewed: it bridged *dancien régime* and Revolution, Baroque and Classicism, absolutism and Enlightenment, and so forth. Such perceived divisions strongly influence the modern reception of 18th-century opera, for example in the perceived difference between opera before Mozart and after: the former is 'early music', the latter Classical repertory. Some of Gluck's operas belong to the former category in the Anglo-American world but to the latter in continental Europe. Related constructions oppose Baroque opera (the artistic mirror of an imagined courtly environment) to Classical-Romantic opera (a dramatic musical work aspiring to the standards of original authorship). The former type needs restoring, reviving or re-creating, the latter editing, performing and interpreting. These fixed views of cultural history are also implied when opera historians welcome the arrival of 'flesh and blood' in 18th-century opera (for example thanks to Handel, the middle classes, Goldoni or Mozart) or deplore a loss of performative spontaneity in favour of canonical repertoires.

The Classical-Romantic aesthetic of music as a self-expressive art, which appears towards 1780 in the critical literature of the European Enlightenment and has dominated 19th- and 20th-century views, was imposed on earlier opera with little regard to the genre's theatrical loyalties. From this perspective, most 18th-century opera appears as a pre-enlightened practice, enslaved by its social functions but also curiously irrational or dreamlike: an authoritarian puppet theatre. Even its traditional task of imitating nature by portraying the affections is thought to have been essentially beyond its reach, not to speak of the challenge of expressing true humanity on stage. This perception, which puts the burden of dramatic expression too exclusively on musical composition, should be contrasted with ideas by which the century understood itself (particularly when it began), with ideas cultivated in areas more in need than in possession of enlightenment and with ideas belonging to the context of theatre rather than that of 'Art'. If this were done, three things might become clear:

(a) 18th-century opera was less a snapshot of contemporary society than a controversial expression of particular desires and fantasies. It required active promotion to find its place in a society which neither needed nor could afford it. Around 1700, it still seemed exotic to most Europeans, while in Italy it survived thanks to its ability to entertain tourists. French and English observers of this time (Saint-Evremond, North, Addison) discuss Italian opera like a culinary object that was not a real alternative to proper food.

(b) Opera in Italy, hemmed in between academic complaints, ecclesiastical censorship, illiteracy, social restrictions on performers and the competition of improvised theatre, defended its cultural status by maintaining literary standards and humanist ideals while attracting the crowd with fine singing and spectacular staging. The concessions to popular taste, conventionality or star performers, which today are nostalgically seen as the essence of Italian opera altogether, conflicted with at least some of Italy's literary-dramatic traditions although they later helped to project a certain 'italianità' which inspired as well as limited its further development.

(c) Given, however, the strength of opera – Italian and other – in its appeal to fantasy, popularity or spontaneity, it is no wonder that so many artistic, intellectual and political trends in 18th-century Europe seized upon the genre to promote themselves. One of these trends was surely the emancipation of dramatic music, another the emancipation of the thinking individual (the Enlightenment). From the early claims of the courtly society on opera as a vehicle of absolutist propaganda, via bourgeois realism, sentimentalism and classicism to the impact of revolution and romanticism, the fate of opera in the 18th century was that it became ingrained in European culture.

2. Social practice.

(i) Institutions and circulation.

Before 1690, opera was practised in Italy, at the court of Louis XIV and (with variable frequency) at about 20 courts of central Europe. In the following 100 years, Italian opera was taken up at another 40 courts and cities of central Europe and in the kingdoms of Spain, Portugal, England, Denmark, Sweden and Russia. This expansion was largely motivated by the social status of opera as a classicist and monarchic art. The courts, especially if influenced by Enlightenment ideas (Berlin, Dresden, Mannheim, Stuttgart, Milan, Florence, Parma), also appreciated the artistic and educational values of the genre. Metropolitan centres (Paris, Vienna, Madrid, St Petersburg, London) and even some secondary cities outside Italy witnessed an increasing competition, resisted by some courts, between Italian, French

and local operatic traditions and their languages. Organizationally, there were of course vast differences between the status of a major court opera such as the Parisian Académie Royale de Musique (whose control had ramifications throughout the country) and, say, the business of the Venetian impresario Angelo Mingotti, who staged *opera seria* and comic intermezzos in Moravian and Austrian district towns (1732–c.1745). There was a contrast of climate between the small but ambitious court operas in central and northern Germany (Bayreuth, Brunswick, Wolfenbüttel, Kassel, Düsseldorf) and the huge international opera fairground of Venice which continuously circulated plots, performers and musical settings. Civic opera was usually controlled by societies of gentlemen with the financial support of a court and of wealthy visitors, as in Venice, Prague and Hamburg. Impresarios managed productions either in the employ of courts and cities, or on a profit basis for themselves. They might rely on a central opera house, engaging new performers and authors each season, or move personnel and productions from place to place in the pursuit of new audiences. The economic principles were nevertheless comparable everywhere: patronage had to make up for the losses incurred through high production costs and uncertain or non-existent box-office takings. Financial patronage took many different forms, from that of shareholding companies (Royal Academy of Music, London) via ticket and box subscriptions to entirely court-financed businesses. In contrast to the even more spendthrift practices of the previous age, many institutions tried to contain costs by circulating productions: for example, by offering them in both palace and public performances (as in Naples, Florence, Paris/Versailles and Fontainebleau, Modena and Reggio nell'Emilia, Vienna, Berlin and Potsdam, Brunswick and Wolfenbüttel); by exchanging courtly and impresarial productions (northern Italy, Prague/Dresden, Hamburg/Brunswick); or by repeating productions in summer residences or secondary cities (Vienna, Rome, Tuscany, the Veneto). Repertories were hardly established yet, except for the cultivation of a Lullian corpus at the Académie Royale de Musique and in Brussels. Travelling companies were most likely to develop standard works and repertories. Still, the annual amount of new opera productions was always greater than that of revivals; in the period c.1700–40 it could reach ten or eleven in Venice and five to seven in Vienna, London or Hamburg.

(ii) Genres.

In the 18th century (unlike the 17th) genre distinctions, or occasionally their blurring, were a major issue. The precepts of the classicist, Aristotelian poetics influenced operatic practice and theory from about 1690, leading to a separation of tragic and comic genres. Much of this distinction had to do with the theatrical projection of social structures.

Comic *intermezzi per musica* were developed in Naples and Venice (c.1700–06) and soon distributed to the north; full musical comedy began in Naples about 1707, and in the 1740s merged with Venetian parody operas to form *opera buffa*. Comic opera's social criticism, a task sanctioned by classical precedent, was never more radical than in these early years. Although many early *opere buffe* and intermezzos conform to the Aristotelian description of comedy (by portraying ordinary, contemporary and shrewd people), intermezzos were accepted in the court theatres as a *divertissement*, whereas *opere buffe* were at first considered low-class by aristocratic patrons. They depended, in any case, on the empathy of their spectators with the social connotations of the plots.

Serious opera conveyed its institutional and moral messages within a more autonomous aesthetic framework of vocal virtuosity, poetry and stagecraft. The artificiality of the theatre and the beauty of music functioned as 'pink spectacles' by which to observe truly human experiences, mediated by performers. The genre offered women on stage, beautiful costumes, changeable sets (*mutazioni di scena*), machine effects, dancing and fencing – effects that were criticized by some as sensual but were never given up. The social connotations of the genre are nevertheless specific. The association of the music with the moral implications of the plots (ethos and pathos) was perhaps greater than in other phases of opera history. An assiduous patron such as Emperor Charles VI in Vienna (1711–40) requested contrapuntal styles from his composers to match the lofty thoughts of his poets. In Pietro Metastasio's libretto *La clemenza di Tito* (1734), it is taken for granted that Charles VI resembles Titus – and this prince finds his inner ethos by defying the claims of power, justice, convenience and the passions of love and fear. Such 'humanization of the great ones', showing them as subject to the same emotions that any spectator might feel, is an enlightened approach that was obscured in the 19th century (but exploited again in Hollywood cinema).

The narrative of Italian opera, whether concentrating on individual feelings in *opera seria* or on social practice in *opera buffa*, was guided by 'reason'. With exceptions depending on cultural context, it largely avoided the supposed irrationality of the *tragédie en musique*, which cultivated 'le merveilleux'. 18th-century French *grand opéra* (as it was already called) and *opéra comique* still adhered to wonder and spectacle, fuelling endless polemics right into the 1780s.

Early in the century, the parody plays of the Parisian fairground stages often satirized the latest *tragédies*. The path from these spoken comedies with intermittent songs (*opéras comiques en vaudevilles*) to comic operas with spoken

dialogue (*opéras comiques*, *opéras bouffons*, *comédies mêlées d'ariettes*) crossed, as it were, the demarcation between non-opera and opera. An analogous development is seen in opera parodies and parody intermezzos (later one-act *farse*) appearing in Venice, Florence, Hamburg, Vienna and elsewhere, often bourgeois in dramatic content and philosophy; these were the forerunners of comic operas or Singspiel. The fashion of the English ballad opera began in London with the parodistic *Beggar's Opera* of 1728. Spanish operas were traditionally mythological or pastoral zarzuelas and musical *comédias*; heroic, satirical and popular plots took over as time went on.

Some structural characteristics, particularly of Italian opera, were later criticized as 'rationalistic' or 'rigid', for example the alternation between recitatives (dialogue) and sung numbers. In reality, this alternation offered greater formal variety than most literary spoken drama of the time, which might be recited solely in Alexandrines, *versi scioltior* blank verse. The inherited poetic forms for arias and ensembles – lyrical verse of the Anacreontic variety – reflected the sisterhood of music and poetry as in other Italian vocal genres, but their dramatic function was now co-determined by the surrounding sung dialogue, the recitative.

In comic genres in non-Italian languages, sung closed numbers usually alternated with spoken dialogue; additionally, recitatives were occasionally heard. The courts in Vienna and later in Paris forbade the use of recitative to the civic theatres, as this monopoly implied social status. There was thus a two-layered European tradition: the 'classical' and courtly form was Italian and French serious opera with recitative, whereas the comic and bourgeois genres with spoken dialogue represented the 'vernacular'. The exception was Italian comic opera, which always used recitative. This fact and the genre's through-composed musical forms (concertato finales, already found around 1720, were typical of *opera buffa*) contributed to its international status.

The use of spoken dialogue instead of recitative favoured various cross-currents and transfers, like *opera buffa* into *opéra comique* (from 1752) or *opéra comique* into Singspiel (from the 1760s in particular). From about mid-century, serious operas were created in English, Spanish and German, some originating as translations from French or Italian; and comic as well as heroic operas appeared in Russian and in Scandinavian languages. The distinction of genres relaxed as time went on: there were not only genre mixtures between comic and serious opera (*dramma eroicomico*, *opera semiseria*, *drame lyrique*) but also inflections of the aesthetic and social values formerly typical to the established genres, for example when exotic and serious subjects invaded *opéra comique* and *opera buffa* in the 1760s.

(iii) Performance and performers.

A performative principle of 18th-century opera was the control of nature through its lifelike imitation, which involved artistic uses of the voice (*coloratura*), the body (dance, costume, gesture), language (rhetoric) and of course the imagination. The realistic idea of mimicking people on stage was variously filtered through the artificial literary and musical texts and gestural conventions, the fantastic or complex plots, expensive decorations – which also entered the realistic and comic sub-genres – and above all through codes of public behaviour. Musical performers were highly trained specialists but also ambitious members of a society tied to decorum and etiquette. Performing standards, styles, manners and skills varied more widely than today; the performance itself was perhaps more often responsible for the success or failure of a work. Although audience appeal provided artistic clout to performers, their influence was socially and institutionally mediated; they depended on protectors and managers and on the goodwill of the authorities. In Rome in 1715, the satirical intermezzos *La Dirindina* by Girolamo Gigli and Domenico Scarlatti had to be withdrawn, by papal command, when the leading castrato refused to appear in the role of a pregnant prima donna. In Bologna in 1733, the soprano Anna Maria Peruzzi appealed against the allegedly bad music that J.A. Hasse had composed for her, but she had to sing it. Rows on or behind the stage found ample reflection in parody operas showing the predicament of the impresario between warring artists.

Opera continuously addressed issues of gender and class (for example by enacting behavioural norms on stage) and targeted social customs of dressing, fencing, dancing, feasting, litigating and so on. Women were not allowed on the public stage in the Church State, but otherwise appeared in far more opera houses than in the 17th century. Despite discrimination and sexual exploitation, women often competed with castratos for the most lucrative roles. The interest in castrato voices, which increased until about 1770–80, has artistic, economic and probably social dimensions. They hardly ever appeared in France or in bourgeois opera genres.

Family and marital bonds were frequent among performers, composers and impresarios. In smaller companies, authors, managers and performers were sometimes one and the same, just as in the spoken theatre; examples of the personal union impresario-librettist-singer are found from Francesco Borosini (Vienna, 1724–c.1731) and Antonio Denzio (Prague, 1724–35) to Emanuel Schikaneder (Vienna, 1783–1812).

The social and technical conventions of performance, such as role hierarchies or conducting and rehearsing routines, are familiar from contemporary criticism, which invariably deplores cliché and irrationality. Performers became more closely tied to the demands of individual works; the pasticcio practice, which had allowed them to insert their own favourite arias, scenes or ballet entrées into contexts for which they were not intended, declined after about 1760. Singers could become directly involved in stylistic and dramatic conceptions (for example the castrato Gaetano Guadagni in Gluck's opera reform); but on the whole, they lost influence on the literary or musical text while retaining their prominent status in the business.

(iv) Audiences.

Opera-going was an activity reflecting personal interests or taste, as is evident from the polemics about it, but within a framework of social status and convenience. Court opera was attended by court members without payment and in deference to the ruler. Next came the large group of aristocratic or patrician patrons with their friends and guests (rarely their wives), who may have had sponsoring interests or who valued opera for social contact; this group has also left most of the written documentation of the practice. These people went to the opera as many times as possible and, if they travelled, in as many places as possible. Middle-class spectators were rare in court opera, as they could not afford the tickets, although there was the occasional free performance for 'all citizens' at such courts as Vienna or Brunswick. Servants could usually attend, free, in the gallery. The social spectrum of audiences, however, gradually expanded downwards, especially in the comic genres; the aristocracy, on the other hand, attended both types of entertainment throughout the century.

The shifts in attendance and dissemination corresponded to an unpredictable but, on the whole, massive publicity for opera, which exceeded the critical discourses about opera in other centuries. The operatic debate was disseminated across Europe by the literary élite in treatises, memoirs, letters, novels and new opera librettos, and it helped transform the genre itself in its relationship to public life. The early 18th-century Roman and Venetian fights over opera boxes (*guerre dei palchi*) were part of feuds between aristocratic clans; the London pamphlet wars around Handel, the Royal Academy of Music and the Opera of the Nobility (1720–37) had political, literary and moral implications (the foreign genre itself was under scrutiny). The most famous debate, the pamphlet war of the Querelle des Bouffons (Paris, the early 1750s), exemplifies the way in which artistic, political and other convictions might crystallize around individual opera productions. The Gluckists and Piccinnists were moved both by literary ambition and by contrasting attitudes to Marie Antoinette's involvement in operatic reform at the hands of foreign composers.

Probably the most tangible and lasting effects of opera's public acclaim were found, in the course of the years, in opera itself, as its singing heroes, princesses, chambermaids, village philosophers and high priests learnt to pronounce the spectators' own beliefs and superstitions.

3. Stylistic evolution.

(i) Up to c1760.

For Pier Jacopo Martello (*Della tragedia antica e moderna*, D1715), opera as a genre was to be avoided by the selfconscious poet. It was impure drama, perhaps to be redeemed in the distant future by the dramatic power of music. But in the same year, Antonio Salvi promised in the preface to his libretto *Amore e maestà* that, after the tragic catastrophe with the hero's death, the spectators 'would leave the theatre in tears, surrounded by sweet musical harmonies'. By directly engaging music in audience bonding – through sympathy, terror and compassion – this theatrical practice was heading for opera as we know it.

The 17th century had not posed the question of drama in opera with any rigour, and had rather indulged in the playgrounds of pastoral Arcadia and classical myth. Since about 1690, the Roman Accademia dell'Arcadia and other literary circles requested a return to utter simplicity or to spoken tragedy altogether. Hostility to opera on moral, national or social grounds also persisted, particularly outside Italy. Moderate supporters, some personally involved in the business as librettists (Apostolo Zeno, Pietro Pariati, Antonio Salvi, Barthold Feind) or composers (Mattheson, Telemann), attempted reform, adopting ethical and dramaturgical principles of French spoken drama (Corneille, Racine, Pradon, Molière). They insisted, however, on the legitimacy of a form of drama that is sung throughout, as it was at that time in serious and comic Italian and German opera and in the *tragédie en musique*. To transform canzonettas or couplets into scenic-dramatic monologues, or recitation into spontaneous utterances of a character,

implied, first, a new aesthetic of word-setting. Symmetrical and dance-type arias yielded to long, pulsating *allegromovements*; melodic panache and rhythmic variety focussed listeners' attention on the lifelike musical process and the singer rather than the poetic form, without sacrificing declamatory impact.

The important questions of dramaturgy and verisimilitude (could Julius Caesar sing arias? how could a happy ending be made plausible?) concerned the imitation of human nature through music and thus the contribution of music to drama. Examples of such contributions which were deemed successful at the time are found in operas by Alessandro Scarlatti, Handel, Vinci, Hasse and Pergolesi (for example in his intermezzos *La serva padrona*, 1733). What had started as an ultimate refinement of the aesthetic of word-generated song here became a tendency of music to express affections, ethos and status of characters, even ideas and plots: the fabric of theatre itself. This move beyond words was made as the technical devices of coloratura, improvised cadenza, orchestral figuration and colour enhanced the imitative powers of music. The size and variety of timbre of opera orchestras were more rapidly increased than in any other period; the vocal coloraturas reflected the ambitions of a competitive profession. This first flourishing of *Tonmalerei* in opera is connected with composers such as Vivaldi, Telemann, Rameau or Jommelli in their very different ways.

The artistic representative of this phase of European opera was the poet Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782). In his earliest works, Metastasio benefited from the inspiration of a prima donna, Marianna Benti Bulgarelli, and he cultivated a lifelong friendship with the castrato Farinelli. The ethical and enlightened plots, the refined poetic language and Metastasio's superb dramaturgical skill must have helped singers to suspend their own disbelief in face of musical challenges.

Benedetto Marcello's *Il teatro alla moda* (D1720) satirized the provincial or old-fashioned habit of opera singers to stand occasionally beside their role and break the suspension of disbelief (they waved at their protectors, for example). This unwittingly 'epic' sort of theatre (in the Brechtian sense), which allowed for pregnant pauses or interruptions by audience reactions, often occurred in the unwritten sections of the performance such as cadenzas, or between aria and recitative. As time went on, the performative event became increasingly controlled by authorial agendas. Plot, stage action, even stage-sets, were increasingly 'composed out', for example in accompanied recitatives depicting nature and emotions. Their performance sounded more spontaneous than that of arias (as Francesco Algarotti emphasized, D1755) but had to be carefully rehearsed because of the tempo changes of the orchestral accompaniment. In *opera buffa*, parodistic effects and *lazzi* (set effects) were originally outside the jurisdiction of librettist or composer. The poet gained his control over them when censorship requested even intermezzo texts to be printed in advance. The composers learnt to express comic effects, as shown in operas by Pergolesi, Latilla and Galuppi, or in Hasse's intermezzos: *opera buffa* became synonymous also with a musical style.

The growing success of *opera buffa* with bourgeois as well as aristocratic audiences is reflected in the aesthetics and career of one of its main authors, Carlo Goldoni (1707–93). As a literary reformer, he intended his spoken plays as replacements of traditional, 'irregular' comedy; his almost 80 *buffa* librettos (*drammi giocosi per musica*) were of secondary importance to himself, but their very theatricality and enlightened moralism helped establish *opera buffa* as a musical genre throughout Europe. To a minor degree, the genre also indulged in musical parody, which relied on the reference to *opera seria* styles – as in Florian Gassmann's music for Calzabigi's *L'opera seria (La critica teatrale)* (1769, Vienna). In *opéra comique* and other vernacular forms, spoken dialogue was the home of verbal entertainment, at least with the better playwrights, but the rise of sentimental, fantastic and mixed plots in mid-century had the effect of channelling the advanced dramatic power of music towards non-heroic fields of expression.

(ii) c1760–90.

An upsurge in operatic creativity in the 1760s and 70s was fuelled by a vastly expanding range of sources for plots, which now included novels, national histories and contemporary news items. Audiences could thus be exposed to stories reflecting the prevailing humanitarian values of the time, such as the cult of the family, the heroism of the humble, the dignity of non-Christian civilizations or the horrors of arbitrary power and unjust detention. Comic opera, while maintaining social satire as a staple dramatic device, engaged in the cultivation of the pathetic, where feminine characters gained in stature and women singers rose to a type of stardom strongly imbued with sentimentalism. Readily understandable subjects and familiar situations were only one aspect of a move towards realism which involved the whole range of operatic creation, production and criticism. The programmatic writings of Francesco Algarotti and Denis Diderot were linked to an increased attention to stage directions and the authenticity of costumes and sets.

Playhouses became starker in their inner decoration and what theatre historians call 'the fourth wall' made itself felt between the stage and the audience. While authors strove to present even the most fantastical events as 'believable' (see Mozart's letter about the supernatural voice in *Idomeneo*, 29 November 1780), the spectators' identification with the characters could reach extremes of emotional involvement, facilitated by packed houses and strong collective feelings.

Serious opera resorted to subjects and episodes which would have been regarded as shocking in the previous generation and were still widely frowned upon. Thus the decorum of Enlightenment opera lost ground to a display of spectacular effects which commentators related (positively or negatively) to the aesthetically 'impure' dramaturgy of the 17th century. Although the comic genre was more pliable and open to stylistic innovation, as shown by the development of the *drame lyrique* and its Italian offshoots, the *dramma serio per musica* or the *farsa sentimentale*, serious opera also proved to be ready for major evolutions, such as the staging of *comédies lyriques* at the Académie Royale de Musique or the burgeoning of the generically ambiguous *dramma eroicomico*.



Act 2 scene x of Sarti's 'Giulio Sabino': engraving from the printed full score (Vienna, c1781)
Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milan

Murders, suicides, battles, gothic settings and supernatural events naturally called for a spicier musical language, especially with regard to harmony and orchestration. But even the more traditional subjects were treated with strongly diversified poetic and musical means, concerning the stage action, aria types, the number of characters involved and the use of choruses; large-scale tonal planning and the use of recurring motifs promoted an overall 'musicalization' of opera to which contemporaries were keenly responsive. Formal flexibility and dramaturgical innovation were made possible by collaborative ventures, such as those of Goldoni and Galuppi, Calzabigi and Gluck (and perhaps Da Ponte and Mozart) or of the librettists Sedaine and Marmontel with various composers in Paris. Practices like the *pasticcio* or singer-induced alterations to existing works were not entirely abolished, but the creative status and public image of opera composers rose significantly, to the extent that Philidor (in 1764) and Gluck (in 1767) could be explicitly recognized as the 'authors' of *Le sorcier* and *Alceste* respectively. When Gluck claimed that his presence at the performance of his works was as essential as the sun to the earth, he was setting an ideal for his successors of the 19th century.

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Opera (i), §V: The 19th century

V. The 19th century

1. Introduction.

However much some may lament the fact, and even though there are now signs of significant change, a large majority of the operas that form the present-day international repertory still hail from a slightly elongated 'long' 19th century, from around 1780 until around 1920. The most frequently performed operas all belong to this period. This curious centrality, not to mention the disturbing presentness of the most famous works, their constant 're-creation' in public and private spaces around the globe, makes any broad historical overview a daunting prospect. What is more, internal chronological divisions within the period are neither obvious nor commonly agreed on, nor does separation of the genre into various national schools, though these retained much currency, seem as unproblematic as it might be in dealing with the 18th century. Accordingly, the ensuing discussion does not follow chronological or national boundaries, relying instead on more neutral divisions that could apply to opera in any century.

As §IV indicates, the very term 'opera' underwent an important transformation during the 18th century, changing from a sub-species of spoken theatre into what was essentially a musical genre. Even though elements of the earlier definition remained in force in some areas during the early decades of the 19th century, perhaps particularly in the case of Italian serious opera, the period saw a gradual consolidation of this change, with music as more and more the dominant element and with the status of the librettist as a literary figure experiencing a sharp decline. On the other hand, in its new guise as a musical genre, opera lost aesthetic prestige, in particular in comparison to 'pure' instrumental music. Late 19th-century attempts to give the genre new status thus often sought to appropriate aspects of the 'symphonic' tradition while simultaneously striving to dignify afresh the non-musical aspects: by notions of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, by publishing librettos as independent literary works or by developing the idea of *Literaturoper*, a type of opera that strives to preserve a pre-existing literary source more or less intact.

Possibly connected to the decline in the genre's literary status, the relationship of opera to larger currents in cultural and political history remains a source of lively debate and not infrequent puzzlement. Key cultural terms such as 'Romanticism' and 'realism' often seem to manifest themselves in opera at periods removed from their appearance in the other arts, or in strangely unemphatic contexts. As just one example, the literary polemics over Romanticism in Italy around 1816–18, or in France in the 1820s and 30s, although they focussed on drama, seemed largely to ignore opera, quite possibly because the genre had already (and without great resistance) escaped those restrictions of time and place that classicists saw as crucial to spoken drama, and because its language, its mode of discourse, was too extraordinary to be co-opted into the debate on either side. Of course, opera partook freely of the new, Romantic dramas as literary sources; but, significantly, it was able to do so without radical readjustments to its outer nature, Romantic and classical subjects frequently remaining side by side in an otherwise largely unchanged formal and stylistic language. This is not to say that such broad cultural shifts did not affect opera profoundly: the new subjectivities that emerged with Romanticism certainly played powerfully across opera's expressive world; but the conjunctions are typically not as immediate as the sharing of certain literary texts might at first suggest.

The same caution might be applied to opera's relationship to history in the broader sense. The political revolutions of the period interrupted the steady production and consumption of operatic pleasure in what are arguably no more than superficial ways, and the persistent association of certain composers (notably Auber, Verdi and a number of eastern

Europeans) with insurrection and social unrest has far more to do with later 19th-century imaginings – nostalgia for a lost time of action – than with any contemporary evidence. Although it was inevitable that the opera house, as an important meeting-place for the urban bourgeois, occasionally became caught up in the century's great bourgeois revolutions, the theatre was far more often a place where the ruling class could rely on stability. This was more so as the century progressed and revolutionary movements embraced an ever wider socio-economic spectrum, many elements of which were excluded from all but the humblest of operatic representations. This is not, of course, to deny that opera in the 19th century was in many areas inescapably bound up with the idea of nation and national representation; merely that political events and operatic events are very different, their relationship often complex and subterranean.

2. Institutions.

Towards the end of the 18th century, regular operatic performances could be seen through much of Europe, even as far afield as Russia. 50 years later, however, the genre had become a well-nigh global phenomenon. Apart from certain pockets of partial resistance, this expansion was primarily of Italian opera, first in a huge wave of Rossini fever (there was a Rossini vogue in Chile in the 1830s), and then of his followers, in particular Verdi. By 1870 the most popular of Verdi's operas were being performed in many a far-flung outpost in North, Central and South America, and they had also travelled to Australia, China, India and South Africa.

In the more remote regions, opera was often brought in by means of intrepid touring companies, bravely making use of an expanding system of rail transport. Within Europe, however, the number of theatres dedicated to fixed seasons of operatic performance increased considerably, especially during the first half of the 19th century. After the revolutions of 1848 there came about a gradual change, and a gradual decline in opera's economic fortunes in the main centres of western Europe. Partly this was a matter of changed public habits among the privileged classes: there were now other possible meeting-places, and new, competing forms of cultural activity. But it was also to do with the changing nature of operatic institutions.

Although traces of what might loosely be described as 'court opera' in the 17th- and 18th-century sense occasionally survived into the early 19th century, notably in Germany and Austria, by far the most common financial basis for an opera house was within a mixed economy. The key figure was the impresario, already much in evidence in the 18th century, who arranged seasons and engaged singers and composers, usually receiving some kind of subsidy from the theatre's owners (who might or might not be the local government) but also speculating at his own financial risk. The highpoint of the impresarios' power came in the first half of the 19th century, a period that saw powerful figures such as Louis Véron and his successors at the Paris Opéra; Alessandro Lanari, who controlled large regions of central Italy and thus to an extent coordinated the repertory and performing resources; and Bartolomeo Merelli, who arranged similar exchanges between such important centres as La Scala, Milan, and the Kärntnertheater in Vienna. Looser connections took place between Her Majesty's Theatre in London and the Théâtre-Italien in Paris, though here the primary link was the shared services of a group of élite singers and their own preferred repertory.

The decline of the impresarios in the latter part of the 19th century marked several important changes in operatic life. The increasing establishment of a core repertory, and the consequent decline in production of new works (see below, §3), reduced the impresarios' role, as did the gradual strengthening of copyright controls (over both new and repertory works), which vastly increased the power of certain publishers, who now began to take a more active role in operatic production. Competition intensified, and profit margins decreased, with the gathering popularity of large, arena-type theatres later in the century. For the major theatres, state funding, with impresarios likely to be little more than paid managers, became the norm; and this model continued its precarious existence through the 20th century.

3. Repertory.

One of the key changes during this period was the decisive formation of an operatic repertory, the gradual emergence of a body of works that were revived countless times in countless different venues, and the consequent decline in the production of new operas. Repertory works were of course not unknown in the 18th century and earlier: the operas of Lully and Rameau had achieved something like that position in France, as had the oratorios of Handel in England. It should also be recalled that an operatic repertory of a kind did indeed exist in the 18th century, but that the 'work' was typically a libretto, not its musical setting: several of Metastasio's librettos were endlessly restaged in the 18th century, in numerous musical settings. Some of Mozart's operas (in particular *Don Giovanni*) may have tentatively established

repertory status in England and Germany in the first decade of the 19th century, but the crucial change in direction occurred in Italy (the centre previously most resistant to repertory formation) and began with the most popular comic operas of Rossini, which established for themselves a permanent position around the globe, to be followed by various works by Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi. By the 1840s the term 'repertory opera' was in common use in Italy and rapidly spread elsewhere; the disruptions of 1848–9 and the international successes of Verdi's middle-period operas solidified the process.

In the second half of the century, the idea of a repertory was thus firmly entrenched; but in its earliest phases the corpus changed quite radically. From the 1850s onwards, the first pan-European challenge to Italian hegemony came, from French *grand opéra*, in particular the works of Meyerbeer, which became a truly international phenomenon, even establishing a (highly contested) position in Italy itself. Then, towards the end of the century, Wagner's operas gained ground, in several countries displacing all but the most hardy of Italian operas (it was not until the 1920s and 30s, with the so-called Verdi Renaissance, that Italian and German opera established a comfortable co-existence as the backbone of the repertory). Towards the end of the 19th century, with new operas becoming ever more scarce, we see glimmers of what, 100 years later, had become a major force: the idea of the operatic revival as an agent of repertory renewal. When Handel's *Almirante* was performed in 1878 in Hamburg, it initiated a process that would grow steadily through the 20th century, though still not rapidly enough to challenge the central position still occupied by works from the 'long 19th century'.

The effects of this repertory formation on operatic institutions are referred to in §2 above. But there were other, equally important repercussions. During the first few decades of the 19th century, star singers tended to limit themselves to works in one national tradition, and could rely on making a living out of roles either written specially for them or in some way adapted to their strengths and weaknesses: choice of a company of singers would typically precede choice of repertory for a given season. By the end of the century this situation was often reversed, singers tending more and more to adapt their voices to a variety of roles and musical styles and composers being less willing to tailor roles for a particular voice. An international singing style emerged.

But perhaps the most fundamental change brought about by repertory opera occurred in the nature of operatic communication. In an operatic world based primarily on new works, composers had to produce quickly and to communicate immediately with audiences: if a work failed at its first performances, that failure was often absolute. Hence the importance of generic conventions, whose presence could stimulate and ease creative endeavour while at the same time offering audiences ready points of contact and a reassuring familiarity. Small wonder, then, that these conventions lost ground as the repertory set in. New works now had to pass a sterner test, defining themselves as ever more radically different from their competitors. As originality became increasingly the watchword, original composition became ever harder. The sense of an operatic tradition was lost, or rather was searched for in the ever more distant past.

4. Genres.

The separation of comic and tragic genres that had been established in the 18th century was firmly in place, whatever the national school, at the start of the 19th century, and remained fairly constant for the first few decades. True, there was also a tradition of so-called 'mixed' works (the French *comédie larmoyante* or the Italian *opera semiseria*), but, rather than escape the traditional divisions, these types, the latter especially, tended to emphasize them further by using genre juxtaposition as a primary means of dramatic articulation. An additional continuity with the 18th century was in the tendency of comic works to occupy a less elevated position in the operatic pantheon, frequently appearing in minor theatres and addressing a less elevated audience. This tendency hardened in the decades around the middle of the century: Rossini-style comic operas, though retaining a robust currency, particularly in dialect traditions, became unpopular with the most successful composers.

However, this falling away or diluting of comic opera was accompanied by two highly significant developments. The first was an increased infiltration of comic scenes into serious opera. In Italy Verdi was active in this fusion of genres, integrating frankly comic scenes into several of his post-1850 operas. Perhaps even more striking, in France the later 19th-century *drame lyrique* owed at least as much to an earlier tradition of *opéra comique* as it did to *grand opéra*. Other national opera traditions of the later 19th century, the Russian and the Czech, seemed easily to embrace this mixture of the comic and the serious.

The second development was the emergence of a new genre, now known under the broad title of operetta. Though there were important precedents both in France and Germany, the decisive point is usually seen to be marked by the

works of Offenbach in the 1850s, first known as *opéras bouffes* after the theatre in which they were initially presented. The international popularity of this new style led to offshoots in other countries, each with a distinctive national character, and each drawing from indigenous traditions: the *Operetten* of Johann Strauss and others in central Europe (which owed something to the earlier *Singspiel*); the works of Gilbert and Sullivan in England (which drew energy from vaudeville and ballad opera traditions); the revival of the zarzuela in Spain and from there its dissemination to Central and South America.

5. Plots.

Among the huge diversity of operatic plots in the 19th century, it would seem very difficult to trace purposeful lines of development. On the most basic level, however, one might hazard that the domination of French dramaturgical models seen at the end of the 18th century was in large part maintained through the next 100 years. When sea changes occurred in the manners of French spoken theatre – for example the advent of *mélodrame* in the early years of the 19th century, or the subsequent turn towards ‘realism’ around mid-century – then opera followed, and did so regardless of the various inflections brought on by national differences.

But certain large shifts in cultural attitude nevertheless left their mark. For example, opera plots are surely implicated in the now familiar idea that the 19th century saw an important turn away from what the sociologist Richard Sennett has called the idea of ‘public man’: an increasing tendency for ever more stressed and crowded urban dwellers to seek coherence not within the public world of politics and public display, which had so often betrayed them and was ever more obviously beyond their control, but rather within the private world of the family and of personal relationships generally. It has been plausibly suggested that this change is played out in operatic subjects: that those grand historical canvasses of the early century gradually gave way to ‘claustrophobic’ dramas, in which the individual’s plight became the chief focus of attention (related to this could be the decline in the prestige of comic works, which inevitably lie more in the public world). For example, the decline of French *grand opéra* of the Meyerbeerian type has been traced in precisely these terms (Gerhard, E1992), and the progress of a composer such as Verdi, whose operas span a large part of the century, is a further case in point: although grand choral effects nearly always played a part in his works, the increasing manner in which individuals come to dominate the drama is obvious. Wagner’s ‘retreat’ into myth in the second half of his career might be taken into this story with only a little sense of strain; and a seemingly logical end-point occurs in the early 20th century, with purely psychological works such as Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*, or with the operas of Puccini, in which any political aspects are typically overwhelmed by the focus on individual passions.



Opening scene of Act 3 of Verdi's 'Rigoletto', Covent Garden, London, 1853, including (from left to right) Giorgio Ronconi (Rigoletto), Angiolina Bosio (Gilda), Constance Nantier-Didé (Maddalena) and Giovanni Mario (Duke of Mantua): lithograph from a contemporary sheet-music cover Elizabeth Forbes

However, objections to this neat sense of progress come readily to mind. In the case of Verdi, while the progress from (say) the grand public spaces and themes of *Nabucco* to (say) the claustrophobia of *Otello* might seem compelling, important mature works such as *Don Carlos* will give pause, not least because that opera is arguably one in which the force of history, and thus of the public world, plays with unprecedented influence on the lives of the characters. And with Wagner there is the case of *Die Meistersinger*, in which the composer's dramaturgical techniques adapt with seeming ease to grand public spaces and overt historical gestures. More anomalous still are the operas from emerging national traditions such as those in Russia and elsewhere in eastern Europe, in which the epic style and large historical canvas continue to occupy the centre, albeit sometimes chaotically juxtaposed with an intense focus on individuals.

Undoubtedly related to these matters, and equally problematic, is another large shift, towards what is loosely called ‘realism’ (or *verismo*). Certain key works are routinely mentioned in this light: Verdi's *La traviata*, which was originally

set in almost-contemporary Paris, and which is suffused by the then modern rhythm of the waltz, or Bizet's *Carmen*, with its factory girls, common soldiers and criminals. However, in both cases, as in many others, the 'realistic' effects thus obtained are constantly compromised by their simultaneous status as elements of local colour, which causes them to be in some senses distanced from audience identification and thus made less realistic (there is also the obvious point that the reality of a Violetta or a Carmen was certainly not one to which the contemporary operatic audience would have aspired). Perhaps the literal geographical expansion of opera plots in the later 19th century, their tendency to explore ever more remote and mysterious areas, is in this sense a more significant development, not least because of the musical explorations that it inspired in so many composers. By the closing decades of the century, operatic 'exoticism' – particularly in the French and Italian traditions – had become so common as almost to function as an alternative routine, with its own stock collection of much circulated musical and visual representations.



Scenes from the original production of Delibes' 'Lakmé', Opéra-Comique (Salle Favart), Paris, 14 April 1883: engraving by Fortuné-Louis Méaulle after Defendi Semeghini from 'L'illustration' (28 April 1883)

Mary Evans Picture Library, London

6. Stylistic and formal changes.

The 19th century is conventionally seen as the great age of progress, and so it is perhaps not surprising that the history of its most important cultural products is also depicted primarily as an achievement of goals. In terms of opera, this sense of a gradual move towards some distant oasis (a goal often associated with some vaguely value-laden concept of drama) is typically inscribed on to the lives of individual composers or national schools. This is most striking in the case of Italian opera, whose 19th-century history is still sometimes thought of as a painful achievement of genuine dramatic values, effected by heroic individual effort in the face of formidable resistance.

In such a historiographical context, it is salutary to try to construct a more international picture, one that involves trends larger than those found in any individual composer or even national school. The rigid alternation of recitative (involving dialogue and stage action) and aria (involving monologue and reflection) had already been challenged by the later decades of the 18th century; but the first decades of the 19th century saw the decisive emergence of the multi-movement 'number' as the basic unit of operatic form. This unit was (perhaps as always) more predictable in Italy than elsewhere, but it nevertheless formed the backbone of much opera elsewhere (the partial exception was German opera, which favoured the strophic romance and tended to use multi-movement forms only to demonstrate a character's supposed Italianate qualities). The number contained within it both static and kinetic movements, thus allowing for a variety of emotional representations (and a variety of vocal manners), as well as the injection of stage action – typically the entrance of a character with news from outside – to precipitate contrasting moods. During the early decades (longer in comic opera), recitative or spoken dialogue remained in currency; but this gradually became absorbed stylistically into the number. At the same time, the numbers tended to become less formally predictable and, above all, longer and more complex. Opera across all national styles became increasingly connected musically. By the end of the century it was common, at least in the most elevated styles, for act endings to become the only places of complete musical pause.

These formal changes brought with them other, equally important and equally pan-European, developments. One of the most striking was what has been called a 'dialoguizing' process, the sense in which opera in this period begins to present dialogue – which in classic 18th-century *opera seria* had taken place almost exclusively in recitative – as an increasingly central aspect of its communicative project. This in one sense brought opera closer to spoken drama, by the end of the century allowing such types as *Literaturopern* (works that use as their libretto an existing spoken drama with minimal alteration, although inevitably some cutting). It also meant that the duet in some ways replaced the aria as opera's normative mode of discourse. This should not be exaggerated. Partly because it was so central to opera's dissemination outside the theatre, in concerts and private venues both humble and elevated, the solo aria (or at worst the chunk of monologue) continued in firm currency in almost all types of opera through to the end of the 19th century,

typically remaining an unproblematic aspect of the dramaturgy, not for example requiring special plot preparation to justify its presence. If anything, the hegemony of the aria in the public's operatic imagination was further strengthened by the appearance of recording, which was gathering pace as the century came to a close.

However, the combined effects of 'dialoguizing' and increased continuity, together with a falling away of predictable formal patterns, left room for, and perhaps necessitated, other levels of musical communication within opera. Probably the most important of these was by motivic means. Reminiscence motifs began to be extensively used during the last decade of the 18th century, mostly in France; during the first half of the 19th they appeared in most national styles, perhaps most commonly in German opera, least often in Italian, a point surely reflecting the so-called symphonic aspirations of German composers. In the second half of the century, this tendency to supply an opera with some degree of motivic coherence became even stronger, most famously in Wagner's systematic use of the leitmotif in his later operas, a technique taken up by a great many at the *fin de siècle*. It is often said that leitmotifs should be rigorously distinguished from reminiscence motifs, in that the latter merely punctuate the musical discourse (in fact tending to articulate their message by their difference from their surroundings) while the former constitute the very basis of the musical fabric. But the matter is far from clearcut, not least because there are many stretches of mature Wagner that are (arguably) without leitmotifs: to characterize the musical material of his later operas as deriving exclusively from leitmotivic activity requires a degree of special pleading.

Just as significant: opera got noisier. Although (contrary to general belief) the string sections of operatic orchestras did not get much larger during the 19th century, what might be called the centre of gravity of the orchestra gradually slipped, with lower tessituras used for certain woodwind instruments (flutes and bassoons), a strengthening of the lower brass and the gradual addition of wind instruments of various kinds. These changes were of course related to developments elsewhere: in the demands made of operatic orchestras in the increasingly continuous operatic fabric; in theatre architecture and in the sheer size of venues (dictated by economic considerations); in changes in singing style; and in more general organological developments.

7. National traditions.

In §1 it was suggested that the national differences so important to 18th-century opera gradually began to erode during the 19th century, to give way to an international style; but significant differences remain between the mainstream traditions even in the last decades, ones not only tied to the use of language. However, this process of internationalization may not always move in a direct line towards the century's end. It can be argued, for example, that the pull of French dramaturgical practice, together with the unprecedented prestige and magnificence of French *grand opéra* and the cosmopolitan leanings of Paris, made the 1830s and the beginning of the 40s an earlier moment of rapprochement between the major European traditions, at least within the most elevated genres (similar arguments might also be made for Paris in the first decade of the 19th century). With Italian composers such as Donizetti looking towards Paris and Parisian style, and with the young Wagner deeply influenced by *grand opéra*, one could suggest that Paris had fashioned around itself a European style. But it was not to last. The three most influential composers of the 1850s and 60s – Meyerbeer, Verdi and Wagner – all to some extent redefined a sense of national difference, even while the dissemination of their works was responsible for an internationalization of the repertory.

However, the 19th century also saw the decisive establishment of a number of other national traditions, in particular those in Russia, Poland and various parts of the Habsburg empire, notably the Czech lands and Hungary. All these areas saw vernacular opera during the 18th century, but – as in the case of Germany a little earlier – the formation of a 'national opera' was bound up with a gathering sense of national cultural identity. In all cases one can identify key works that managed, more by dint of multiple performance and/or association with political events than by using folk materials, to collect around them a potent miscellany of musical and dramatic or literary motifs that could come to symbolize the nation. The process here is important: rather than appropriating an already existing fund of national musical material, these operas typically constructed that material, becoming 'national' through their cumulative reception. In both Russia and the Czech lands, the founding fathers (Glinka with *A Life for the Tsar*, 1836:fig.18 [not available online], and Smetana with *The Bartered Bride*, 1866, respectively) were merely the start of a flourishing tradition (albeit one that in Russia continued to find fierce competition from Italian opera), while the work of Erkel in Hungary and Moniuszko in Poland remained to some extent isolated. What is more, Russian opera in particular managed to penetrate the western European repertory, functioning within it as the standard representation of 'other' opera, not bound by any supposed dramaturgical or musical rules associated with the mainstream traditions.

For various political and cultural reasons, other countries found it more difficult to establish national traditions, although many tried. Spain is a typical example, first in the grip of Rossini, then Verdi, then (and always belatedly)

dealing with the equally stifling influence of Wagner and Wagnerism. Other nascent traditions, in countries as far-flung and diverse as Argentina, Greece, Sweden and the USA (many more could be mentioned), had to wait until the 20th century for any decisive national opera to be formed.

8. Singers and other performers.

As has already been mentioned, singers – those central purveyors of opera's message – maintained a substantial influence over the operatic event during much of the 19th century. During the first half of the century, and far beyond that in certain areas, the choice of a roster of singers was the first decision to be made in the construction of an operatic season: only when the performers had been fixed would composers and librettists be contracted, and these 'creators' would then make their decisions about subjects and treatments with a particular cast in mind. This applied even to composers of the greatest imaginable eminence. Verdi or Meyerbeer, for example, were both well aware that their new operas, if successful, were destined for repertory status, and thus to be performed under many different conditions and with many different casts; but they nevertheless tailored individual parts to the première cast, a restriction that seemed if anything to stimulate their creativity. However, as mentioned earlier, the increasing hold of the repertory system in the second half of the century inevitably meant that singers were less and less often involved in creating new roles, and so lost much of their influence, even at a time when increased mobility assured the most famous of them unprecedentedly large earnings.

One of the most striking aspects of vocal change during the period is the extent to which singers altered in type. By the 1830s the castratos, already in steep decline during the later 18th century, had all but disappeared from the operatic stage, their heroic roles first taken by the *contralto musico*, then by the Romantic tenor. This drop in the tessitura of heroes continued through the 19th century. In the early decades, for example, tenors freely used a 'mixed voice' to produce graceful high notes, but by the 1840s this had for the most part disappeared, giving way to a concentration on the more baritone, heavier tenor range. The rise of the so-called heroic tenor roughly coincided with the emergence of the dramatic baritone as his central antagonist, or even, particularly after 1850, as the principal character. All voice types gradually sacrificed flexibility for sheer power: the ornamental vocal writing that had been the province of all up to about 1820 had become by mid-century the exclusive domain of female singers, and then only a sub-group of them.

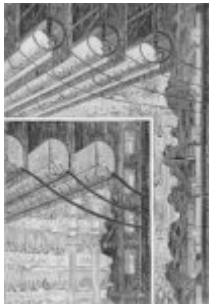
These changes, as already mentioned, are related to other developments in operatic practice: the need for greater power, for example, clearly went hand in hand with the expansion of the orchestra and of theatres generally. The shift away from soprano voices (which had dominated 18th-century opera) in heroic roles, and also perhaps the rise of the baritone, could be related to an increasing desire for a degree of operatic realism: opera came closer to the communicative codes of spoken drama if the singing voices of characters were differentiated in a manner similar to their vocal differentiation in a stage play. But there are also interesting ways in which these developments might cautiously be linked to wider cultural change.

The situation of women on stage, for example, seems to invite such speculation. Although women were an accepted part of 18th-century theatrical life, their social position was frequently precarious. In part for this reason, women singers tended to come from theatrical families (where they would enjoy a degree of protection) and to come a poor second to the castratos in terms of earning power. However, the 19th century saw a great rise in the hegemony of the prima donna, and through most of the century (despite competition from star tenors) they could often outstrip their male colleagues in fame and fortune. Women of many stations now chose the life of an opera singer, seeing in it a chance for individual professional advancement otherwise rather rare for their sex. But it is at least arguable that this rise in status and professional power was accompanied by a tendency in opera plots to treat female roles as increasingly 'other': ever more powerless to effect the violent events that surround and all too often overwhelm them.

During the second half of the 19th century, the power of singers of either sex to influence the operatic event was being challenged by another interpreter: the conductor. At the start of the century, the typical method of coordinating the musical aspects of an operatic performance was by means of two directors: the *maestro al cembalo*, who at premières was often the composer and who often had a special responsibility for the vocal aspects; and the principal violin, who would use his bow to beat time and generally marshal the orchestra. This system fell into disuse around mid-century (earlier in Germany and England, later in Italy), to be replaced by something more like the modern conductor. By the end of the century the star conductor was gaining in influence, the most prominent of them having considerable sway over many aspects of the operatic event.

9. Staging.

The idea that staging might be closely coordinated with other aspects of operatic performance of course existed well before the 19th century, but this period nevertheless brought about extensive revisions in both the practice and the philosophy of opera's visual system of communication. Much of the stimulus for this came first from German-speaking theatres, where already in the late 18th century considerable attention was being paid to the total effect of theatrical performance. By the 1820s Weber, in Dresden, was putting into operation a system in which all staging elements of an opera were selfconsciously to be united, taking particular trouble with soloists' (and even the chorus's) histrionic abilities.



Electric batten and wing lights at the Paris Opéra (Salle...

Many of the developments were fuelled and encouraged by technological change: gas lighting appeared in theatres around 1820, electricity in the second half of the century (fig.20). Both of these were of course safer than previous, naked-flame alternatives; but they also allowed for greater sophistication of stage illusion, as did enlarged backstage spaces and more complex machinery. By the 1830s the acknowledged leader in these fields was the Paris Opéra, in which vast expense and untold energies went into creating elaborate visual display. This activity was marked by the emergence of the so-called *livrets de mise en scène*, production books in which many aspects of the visual would be painstakingly notated, and which were intended to ensure that works first given in Paris would be 'correctly' mounted in the provinces and elsewhere. The *livrets'* appearance thus coincided with, and was inseparably linked to, the establishment of

repertory opera, and called into question a crucial aesthetic issue: when revivals of a classic work were mounted, how far should the original staging of that work be considered part of its basic 'text'? The appearance of the *livrets* reflected a radically restrictive answer to these questions, each *livret* aiming to make certain aspects of the production a fixed text, and (often explicitly) to govern the visual manner in which the operas would be revived.

In houses devoted to Italian opera, whether in Italy or elsewhere, such issues were less pressing. During the first half of the 19th century, the librettist (or house poet) generally took charge of staging, and the sheer speed at which productions went on stage suggests that there was far more reliance on convention and routine solutions. However, the influence of French theatrical practice spread and by the 1860s elaborate *disposizioni sceniche*, directly modelled on the *livrets*, began to accompany the most prestigious premières. By the 1870s and 80s, the grandest of grand operas, whether in France, Italy or Germany, were vast and fearsomely complex undertakings, great monuments to archaeology and Romantic illusion. The prototype of the modern director emerged, most obviously in the formidable presence of Richard Wagner, whose Bayreuth stagings of his operas in the late 1870s and early 80s pioneered a darkened auditorium, an orchestra hidden from view and a new, more 'naturalistic' acting style, all of which further intensified the sense of audience involvement in the visual spectacle. Wagnerian attention to the spectacle was as much a revolution in audience behaviour as it was in directorial practice. Through much of the 19th century, the audience was by modern standards undisciplined and noisy: it was only when the advent of electric stage lighting allowed the auditorium to be in almost total darkness that anything like present-day silence became the norm.

10. Sources, dissemination.

The practice of printing a libretto for each revival of an opera, for sale in or near the opera house and with information about the cast, other executants and often with a preface by the librettist, continued to roughly 1850 and was then gradually replaced by generic librettos produced by publishers. These documents served as an important point of communication with the public, were consulted by many in their (dimly) lit auditoriums and doubtless influenced the manner in which an opera was received in ways now difficult to imagine – surely, for example, highlighting the manner in which operatic music is a setting of a poetic text.

The 19th century also saw a consolidation and then vast expansion of the vocal score as the prime physical means of disseminating the musical text of an opera. Early in the century, particularly in Italy, individual numbers ('pezzi staccati') would often be released first; the complete score could later be assembled by binding these pieces together. Printed full orchestral scores were rare in Italy until near the end of the century (and then were usually for hire only) and appeared in Germany only in certain exceptional cases (Mozart, Weber and especially Wagner). In France, however, the earlier tradition of publishing full scores of the most successful works continued through much of the century. Even where printed scores existed, however, manuscript copies were still the primary means by which the complete text of an opera was distributed to theatres.

While vocal scores clearly aided the dissemination of operas into both private and public spaces, a far more widespread and voluminous means, practically the invention of the 19th century, was the published operatic transcription. In Italy and France particularly, a successful opera of mid-century would be released in an enormous number of arrangements: for piano solo, piano duet, for various instruments and piano, for other (sometimes unlikely) combinations and also in numerous more 'creative' versions, entitled fantasias or reminiscences, sometimes as grand and ambitious as those of Liszt, sometimes much more modest. This corpus of material suggests that operatic music was a major part of the repertory of private salons, or indeed of anywhere that the piano and other instruments were played by amateurs. 19th-century concerts, too, were much more likely to involve either operatic excerpts, arrangements or reminiscences than their counterparts today. Operatic texts and subjects were diffused in less grand venues: in the marionette theatres of Italy, the burlesques of England, the magic lantern shows of Germany and of course the barrel organs of all these places. There is even evidence that operatic melodies sometimes drifted into the channels of oral transmission, to re-emerge as supposed folk material collected by ethnographers in the 20th century. It is probably true that opera, as publicly performed in urban theatres, can rarely be termed popular entertainment in anything like a modern sense (a partial exception might be made of the period between about 1860 and the advent of the cinema, but then only in places with a large Italian population). It is however also true that opera during this period became a phenomenon much broader than merely its theatrical diffusion, however extensive, might suggest.

11. Criticism, aesthetics.

The considerable expansion in so many domains of operatic activity during this period is nowhere more evident than in discourse about the topic. The 19th century saw a huge rise in periodical publication, and a large number of periodicals either included extensive reference to, or were entirely dedicated to, operatic activity. Distinguished titles such as the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (Leipzig), the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* and the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* were accompanied by an enormous number of less ambitious publications. The centre of this activity, at least in terms of bulk, was Paris, in which an important première at the middle of the century would stimulate as many as 20 or 30 separate reviews, many of them lengthy. This outpouring only increased as the century went on, with periodicals tending to become yet more specialized, sometimes even being devoted to a single composer (usually Wagner).

Much of the criticism thus produced was of course directed towards performances and performers, and was written to routine formulae; what is more, many of the opinions expressed were evidently inspired by the owners of the publication, who frequently had biases deriving from financial and/or political interests. Many of the century's most acute critics, however, plied their trade in periodicals: E.T.A. Hoffmann, Schumann, Hanslick, Berlioz, Castil-Blaze, Basevi, Boito, Serov, Stasov and numerous others. The fact that several of these writers were also composers marks an important change in the status of writing about music, one that was perhaps not to reach its climax until the 20th century. The most influential writer about opera in the later part of the century was of course also its most influential composer. In one sense, Wagner's programmes of operatic reform had echoes in countless other such proposals from the past, some of them (Mercadante's, for example) quite recent: a call for renewal in the relationship between music and words; a return to an ancient, ideal concept of drama. But one important difference was that Wagner wrote from an aesthetic standpoint in which absolute music was in a position of ascendancy in relation to opera, at least among an élite of philosophers. It was a standpoint he attempted, by complex reasoning, to challenge as far as his own operas were concerned, and his views were enormously influential, not least among the scholars who now began to analyse his operas within the newly formed discipline of musicology.

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Opera (i), §VI: The 20th century

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Opera (i), §VI: The 20th century

VI. The 20th century

1. Foundations.

At the very beginning of the century the particular dominance of Wagner and Verdi (who died in 1901, and whose final opera *Falstaff* had been first performed in 1893) had already been countered by the quieter Romanticism of Humperdinck and the down-to-earth lyricism of the early Puccini; while in France the alternative tradition associated with Gounod and Bizet lived on in Charpentier's *Louise* (1900). Composers from further east – the Russians Tchaikovsky, Musorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, the Bohemian Dvořák – represented examples of vital and increasingly influential national traditions. From this perspective the emergence of Richard Strauss's mature operatic voice in *Salome* (1905) can be viewed as a re-engagement with the more forceful and intense aspects of the Wagnerian heritage that might otherwise have been lost. After all, while most early 20th-century composers, whatever their regional accent, used a musical language in which chromatic and diatonic tendencies engaged in a flexibly organized dialogue, and to a greater or lesser extent followed the Wagnerian (and late Verdian) practice of large-scale, through-composed forms rather than the strongly contrasted, separate numbers and formal types of earlier opera, the temper of the times immediately before *Salome* had not led composers to seek out such controversial subject matter, nor to provide such disturbing, extravagantly insistent music.

After *Salome* and its immediate successor, the epic tragedy *Elektra* (1909), which brought the post-Wagnerian tradition of a large-scale, single-act drama to its zenith, Strauss himself changed direction and, with *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912) and *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919), sought out a different world, in which the violent and the shocking were less all-pervading and comedy and romance might each find a prominent place. The success that gave Strauss the opportunity to move in this direction was in itself a result of cultural attitudes which regarded the presence of an opera house as a necessary part of a civilized social structure, thus creating, during the 19th century, the need for repertory at a time when the new was more highly regarded than the old.

The persistence of such attitudes into the 20th century was particularly apparent in the German-speaking countries. In the years before 1940, these countries sustained an operatic culture in which several second-rank composers were able to achieve regular performance with works whose style and subject matter reflected the achievements of Wagner, Strauss and Humperdinck without being so pale a shadow that their artistic value was utterly negligible. Such operas as Pfitzner's *Palestrina* (1917), Schreker's *Der ferne Klang* (1912), Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* (1920) and Zemlinsky's *Eine florentinische Tragödie* (1917) display an adaptability, and the ability to feed off such potent sources as Wagner's myth-making, Strauss's 'decadent' Expressionism and Puccini's lyric realism, while adding something distinctive. Of such composers in the century's first three decades, no example is more remarkable than that of Siegfried Wagner, who composed 17 stage works between 1899 and 1930, several of which were successful. Few have been regularly revived since his death.

2. Continuity and change.

While some of the greatest operas of the century's early years, such as *Elektra* and Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* (1910), acknowledged, and even helped to legitimize, the more radical harmonic practices of the time, such truly innovatory stage works as Schoenberg's 30-minute monodrama *Erwartung* (written in 1909) and his no less concise 'drama with music' *Die glückliche Hand* (written in 1913) both had to wait until 1924 for their premières. For all its technical radicalism, *Erwartung* can still be seen as a product of the Wagnerian obsession with female psychopathology (Isolde, Kundry), and the difficulty of avoiding some degree of intersection with Wagner is equally evident in the no less individual case of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (begun in 1893, completed and first performed in 1902). That Debussy's opera became one of the century's most widely admired and regularly performed is the more impressive for the fact that it exercised relatively little obvious influence on later operatic composition, and even works which are evidently beholden to it in some respects – Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* (1918), for example – are no less strikingly different from it in certain fundamental ways.

In *Pelléas*, Debussy showed how a musical genre deeply indebted to Wagner's stylistic and structural procedures could achieve a notably individual accent by adopting a very different rhetoric and a dramatic subject which, if hardly non-Wagnerian in the sense of contemporary or naturalistic, along the lines of *Louise* or Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904), was quite different in its emphasis on a purely human vulnerability. As *Erwartung* and *Bluebeard's Castle* both illustrate, progressiveness in early 20th-century opera was not simply a matter of replacing emphatic assertion with understatement; but the progressive aspects of the music and the unambiguous focus on the dark side of human psychology, in extremely concentrated structures, give both works a distinctively modern quality that distances them decisively from Wagner and Strauss. Even more radically, though very peripheral at the time, Holst's *Sāvitri* (completed in 1908, first performed 1916) adumbrated a kind of chamber opera, avowedly anti-Wagnerian in style which, if not naturalistic in subject matter, was very unlike any 19th-century variety of music drama. While even *Sāvitri* cannot escape all links with the still potent Wagnerian past, it represents a decisive shift of emphasis, and it served as a pioneering example to Benjamin Britten in his exploration of the world of chamber opera after 1945.

3. 20th-century topics.

The kind of sympathy for human weakness and helplessness in the face of fate found in operas such as *Pelléas* and *Madama Butterfly* was, in the broadest terms, to provide a more fundamental theme for 20th-century opera than the Wagnerian epic world of gods and heroes. To this extent, the typical 20th-century operatic topic, in which vulnerability itself can attain either a heroic or an anti-heroic dimension, might be derived more directly from the 'real life' protagonists of Verdi or Musorgsky. It is not that gods and heroes disappeared from 20th-century opera (or that the gods and heroes of earlier operas, even Wagner's, are actually invulnerable), rather that 20th-century opera, in common with other artistic genres, tended to prefer a direct relation to the real world, even when that tendency reinforced the genre's own artificiality and unreality. A crucial factor is that 20th-century treatments of non-naturalistic subject matter – myth, allegory and fantasy – often acquired an ambiguous quality through the nature of a musical language that found affirmation and positive resolution far more problematic than did the language of the essentially tonal, consonant past.

20th-century composers also favoured those timeless yet familiar topics, such as the Orpheus myth, that had been explored in the genre from the beginning. Such infinitely adaptable topics are open to exploratory treatment while remaining within the perceived borders of the operatic genre. The adaptability of certain archetypal topics to treatment in an explicitly 20th-century style is one reason why new operas were heard with reasonable frequency despite the sustained preference for works from earlier periods. Far from relegating earlier works to the status of occasional revival, the production of operas composed in the 20th century was commercially and artistically possible mainly because the institutions seeking to promote them were primarily supported by a standard repertory that contained very few 20th-century works.

4. Towards mid-century.

After 1914 an essentially late Romantic, heroic kind of opera maintained a powerful rearguard action, not only in Strauss, but in Szymanowski's *King Roger* (1926), Enescu's *Oedipe* (1936) and Busoni's *Doktor Faust* (unfinished, 1925), to cite only three of the most memorable. The evolution of atonal, expressionistic opera continued from Schoenberg's *Erwartung* to *Die glückliche Hand*, and on to the greatest example of the genre, Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925). The exploration of alternatives to large-scale theatrical presentation found in Stravinsky's 'burlesque in song and dance', *Renard* (1922) and *Histoire du soldat* (1918 – 'to be read, played and danced'), led to forms of music theatre

that achieved their greatest impact after 1950, while a no less potent naturalism reached its apex in Janáček's *Káťa Kabanová* (1921), a work that amply fulfilled the promise and personal style revealed in his much earlier stage work *Jenůfa* (1904, with later revisions). The possibility of coping with comedy, fantasy, or a mixture of the two while avoiding expansive Straussian or Puccinian lyricism was shown in Stravinsky's *The Nightingale* (1914), Busoni's *Arlecchino* (1917), Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges* (1921) and Janáček's *The Excursions of Mr Brouček* (1920) and *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1924), as well as in Ravel's *L'heure espagnole* (1911) and *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (1925): and no account of the period should omit the crowning glory of Puccini's output, the not quite completed but highly characteristic *Turandot* (1926).

By the 1920s the musical battle lines had been drawn between an apparent radicalism (Schoenbergian serialism) that sought to submerge rather than celebrate its debts to the past, and an approach – neo-classicism – that celebrated the vitality of the confrontation between past and present, tonal styles and post-tonal techniques. In opera this led to such obvious and profound contrasts as those between Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus rex* (1928) and Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* (composed 1930–32), two treatments of epic-mythic topics that could hardly be more different in musical character and dramatic conception, even if they are closely related in their exploration of how, respectively, Oedipus and Moses move from positions of supreme power to tragic isolation. Differences and similarities may also be compared in two other near-contemporary works, Berg's *Lulu* (1937) and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1934). Each portrays the progressive degradation of the principal character with supreme conviction, even though the musical processes could scarcely be more different – Berg's progressive, Shostakovich's relatively conservative. Notoriously, the history of *Lady Macbeth* is bound up with the repressive cultural principles operative in the Soviet era, when the most challenging works by Russian-born composers, such as Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel* (begun 1919, revised version completed 1927), could be heard only outside Russia, and the most profound operatic treatment of a Russian story was achieved by a composer from a different European country, Janáček, with *From the House of the Dead* (1930).

More fundamental, during the 1920s and 30s, was the contrast between the assumption, common to all the works just mentioned, that opera and its derivatives are forms of high art at its highest, and the view that the genre needed to come down from its Olympian heights and engage with reality much more directly, even didactically. It was not such a great step from Expressionist opera's use of 'low-life' contexts, as in the pub band in *Wozzeck*, to the more central focus on popular, jazz idioms in Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* (1927). Far more radical was the wholesale shift of attitude embodied in the two Brecht-Weill collaborations, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1930; fig.26 [not available online]). In accordance with Brecht's theory of 'epic theatre', the relationship between music and drama is intentionally ambiguous, and music is freed from its time-honoured operatic responsibility of supporting and representing what the words state and imply, just as the form of the work as a whole seeks to reject the highly unified, organic structures promoted during and after the 19th century. Yet *Mahagonny*, in particular, is scarcely anti-operatic: indeed, its importance is not in what it rejects, but in the way it revives the more stylized principles of the number opera and shows their suitability for the range of emotions and situations proper to a modern dramatic subject. With *Mahagonny*, as with Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935) a few years later, the foundations were laid for the parallel development, later in the century, of relatively naturalistic subjects, stemming from Janáček, Weill and Gershwin, alongside the persistence of epic and fantasy.

5. Mid-century perspectives.

By the early 1950s, with what can now be regarded as the masterwork of neo-classical opera, Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* (1951), the powerful political allegory of Dallapiccola's 12-note *Il prigioniero* (1950) and the lively traditionalism of Britten's early operas (*Peter Grimes*, 1945, fig.27 [not available online]; *The Rape of Lucretia*, 1946; *Albert Herring*, 1947; *Billy Budd*, 1951), as well as the first stage works of Hans Werner Henze (*Boulevard Solitude*, 1951; *König Hirsch*, 1956), the genre's health and survivability could not be denied – or denied only by young firebrands like Pierre Boulez who, on principle, associated opera with all that was most decadent and retrogressive in art. Boulez's recantation, which took the form of many remarkable performances in the theatre, including some of 20th-century operas (Debussy, Berg), as well as long-considered plans for a stage work of his own based on a play by Jean Genet, was at worst an acceptance of the inevitable, at best an acknowledgment that his earlier objections were mistaken.

With both Henze and Britten, early success fuelled the kind of regular demand for their work that required immense reserves of energy and creativity. As music dramatists, they are not obviously innovative, even though, in Britten's case, his preference after *Peter Grimes* for chamber opera, including the three 'parables for church performance' composed in the 1960s, represents a significant shift of commitment from the large-scale theatrical enterprise. Even if

not strictly speaking chamber operas, given the resources required to stage them, Britten's last two operas, *Owen Wingrave* (1971) – originally intended for television – and *Death in Venice* (1973), have an intimate quality very different from the grander projections of *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd* or *Gloriana* (1953).

Britten and Henze both developed distinctively personal styles in their early years, and both, at their best, brought a strong sense of expressive depth as well as theatrical conviction to their work. Britten, in music never quite losing touch with tonality, provided a blend of intensity and austerity, and penetrated remarkable psychological depths in his obsessive study of vulnerable outsiders. Henze moved between social comment, or satire, and psychological exploration with an assurance matched by the supple adaptability of his musical language, more radical than Britten's and echoing both Berg and Stravinsky, while slavishly imitating neither. If one essential musical source for both Britten and Henze is Mahler, it is all the more striking that their works are, in the end, so different.

During the second half of the 20th century many countries maintained a special commitment to operas by local composers: Australia, Finland and, not least, the USA had particularly good records in this respect, as well as Germany and Britain. Relatively few of these works crossed national borders, save occasionally in recorded form, and, apart from Britten and Henze, only a handful of composers achieved a sustained international reputation through their stage works – Tippett, Berio, Ligeti and Adams among them. These names indicate that success in opera since 1945 has not simply been the consequence of pursuing a relatively familiar, traditional musical style. Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) pioneered the use of minimalist techniques taken up by Adams and Louis Andriessen, among others, and the adaptability of the genre has extended to the breaching if not the decisive destruction of its domination by male composers. In Britain, for example, Judith Weir produced a particularly accomplished group of stage works, including *A Night at the Chinese Opera* (1987) and *Blond Eckbert* (1994).

6. Modern drama.

While it might be argued that the easiest way for a composer to ensure performance for an opera is already to have achieved prominence in other genres, it is clear that many major 20th-century composers – Messiaen, with his single, relatively late work *Saint François d'Assise* (1983), is the great exception – attempted operas at a quite early stage of their careers. Michael Tippett is a striking case of a composer who believed so deeply in the special importance of the genre that he devoted six years (1946–52) to his first mature effort, *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955), even with little prospect of early performance. That work is particularly special in that, with its explicitly Jungian aura, it is difficult to imagine such a treatment before the age of modern psychology.

After his second opera, *King Priam* (1962), Tippett, no less strikingly than Berio (*Un re in ascolto*, 1984) and Ligeti (*Le Grand Macabre*, 1978), preferred to create dramas which are penetrating if often oblique reflections on contemporary life, contemporary ways of thought, contemporary problems, even when presented in stylized rather than naturalistic fashion. Indeed, it seems difficult to deny that the most memorable operas of the years since 1970 have been either meditations on the perennial topic of the artist in the world (Peter Maxwell Davies's *Taverner*, 1972; Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus*, 1986; or Stockhausen's seven-opera cycle *Licht*, launched in 1981 with *Donnerstag*), or morality plays about those aspects of life that psychology and modern history have brought most directly into question: and, in particular, the subject of social and political authority.

In a long and fruitful line whose specifically 20th-century strain can be traced from *Wozzeck*, the potential of representatives of the state for cruelty – despite occasional glimpses of more human sympathies – has been a theme ideally suited to the tensions and uneasy syntheses of modern musical language, and operas as different in style as Dallapiccola's *Il prigioniero*, Nono's *Intolleranza 1960* (1961), Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten* (1965), John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) and Maxwell Davies's *The Doctor of Myddfai* (1996) bear witness to that. This is not to suggest that all fantasy or comedy has been drained out of contemporary musical theatre, or that there is less generic flexibility in evidence than formerly. If anything, this flexibility is greater than ever since the example set by Weill in the Broadway musicals of his later years, and given that Leonard Bernstein was happy to write opera (*A Quiet Place*, 1983), musical (*West Side Story*, 1957) and 'comic operetta' (*Candide*, 1956). There may be little danger of confusing musicals with opera, whether they preserve spoken dialogue between numbers, like Stephen Sondheim's, or are through-composed, like Lloyd Webber's *Evita* (1978). Yet the application of the term 'rock opera' to the compositions of Lloyd Webber, or to a work like Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell* (1971), can be seen either as demonstrating strength through adaptability or as decadence through a change from sophistication to crudity. While an even better option might be to suggest that 'rock opera' has nothing to do with opera proper, it is dangerous to deny that opera can ever have a viably popular quality, especially in the light of the 20th-century operas in which

young people and amateurs can be involved, from Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) and Britten's *Let's Make an Opera* (1949) and Noye's *Fludde* (1958) to Maxwell Davies's *The Two Fiddlers* (1978) and *Cinderella* (1980).

7. Chamber opera and music theatre.

For many 20th-century composers, rejection of the large scale and elaborate resources of traditional opera was perceived as the best route to a more intense and focussed kind of dramatic expression. If Holst's *Sāvitri* was an early attempt at chamber opera, Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* (1912) – first performed with its reciter in Pierrot costume and the instrumental quintet behind a curtain – was an early example of combining a chamber composition with an element of staging. This more explicitly hybrid enterprise, followed up as it was by Stravinsky's wartime theatre pieces and Walton's *Façade* (begun in 1921), explored possibilities of stylized and allusive dramatic presentation which were taken up with greater consistency and inventiveness after 1950.

Britten's commitment to chamber opera was manifest in the three church parables, *Curlow River* (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968), each of which lasts about an hour and requires a performing group of at least a dozen (male) singers and eight instrumentalists. Another pair of works from the 1960s, Ligeti's *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures* (1966), is more typical of the time in its combination of expressionistically fragmented music and a surrealist style of presentation. Music-theatre works by several of the most prominent younger composers are comparable to the Ligeti works in their challenging yet sharply controlled and economically structured designs: these include Birtwistle's *Down by the Greenwood Side* (1969), Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969), Henze's *Der langwierige Weg in die Wohnung der Natascha Ungeheuer* (1971) and Berio's *Recital I (for Cathy)* (1972). Although all these composers had also written full-size operas, and would write more, it was possible to imagine in the early 1970s that music theatre might supplant opera itself as the favoured medium of dramatic expression, at least for composers of a progressive turn of mind. That this soon proved not to be the case may have something to do with the extent to which music theatre could easily seem closer to the 'happenings' and multimedia events promoted by experimental composers, especially John Cage, than to more mainstream music drama: the co-existence of contrasts provided a more practical way forward than the kind of progress in which the new completely obliterates the old.

8. Operas about opera.

The capacity of operas to contain elements of self-reference – by using actors or opera singers as characters, or the writing or performance of opera as a subject – has been evident since Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor* (1786). Richard Strauss made significant 20th-century contributions in *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Capriccio* (1942), while Britten, in *Let's Make an Opera*, contrived a simple yet lively way of involving audiences with a mixture of adult and child singers in rehearsing and performing an 'entertainment for young people', *The Little Sweep*.

At the other extreme, operas about opera moved into the surreal regions of John Cage's series of five works each called *Europera* (1985–91), a 'homage to the genre' which, at the same time, is a deconstruction of it. In these works Cage applied his characteristic chance operations to existing operatic materials, so that the singers perform 18th- and 19th-century arias for specified periods while the instrumentalists play operatic music that is likely to be quite different, and costumes, sets and all other aspects of production – even the programme synopses – are randomly selected.

Cage's enterprise in the *Europeras*, like other comparable experiments, such as Kagel's *Staatstheater* (1971), can be regarded as an extension of the kind of surrealist attitude to the genre's traditional subject matter and formal principles found in Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and Poulenc's *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (1947). No less modernist in its aesthetic concept than Cage's work, though very different in musical character, is Berio's *Opera* (1970, rev. 1977). Here the title's literal meaning, 'works', is used to promote alternation of and interaction between three quite different stories, represented in turn by Striggio's libretto for Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, a Brecht-like treatment of the sinking of the Titanic, and materials from the Open Theatre of New York's *Terminal*, a strong attack on the way in which terminally ill hospital patients are treated. If the topic of death ensures a common theme, the very different nature of the three types of material ensures that the structure as a whole is fluid and multivalent.

9. Opera and literature.

Opera is neither Berio's most successful nor his most conventional work for the theatre: *Un re in ascolto* has a particularly rich and consistent musical character, serving to project a story which, like Tippett's *The Knot Garden* (1970), refers to Shakespeare's *Tempest* as one particularly effective way of declaring solidarity with the longstanding tradition of theatre as a magical, transcendent enterprise. Operas embodying such allusions seem to have achieved greater artistic success in the later 20th century than those more directly based on great works of literature, though even here the level of achievement varies: Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966, rev. 1974) was more widely admired on revision than in its original version, while Aribert Reimann's *Lear* (1978) has a powerful impact, even if of necessity (it is set in German) it is far removed from the full, elaborate rhetoric of the Shakespearean original. By contrast, Dallapiccola's *Ulisse* (1968) seems too deeply in awe of its Homeric source, while Iain Hamilton's *Anna Karenina* (1981) appears merely parasitic in the sense that, like many television adaptations of major literary texts, only the bare bones of plot and character are preserved; perhaps because the music has little of the strong sense of contemporaneity found in the original novel, the result is more a trivialization than an enhancement of the original. Such failures at least invite a more positive appreciation of more successful adaptations, from Prokofiev's *War and Peace* (begun 1941, completed 1953) to Henze's *Der Prinz von Homburg* and *The Bassarids* and Britten's *Death in Venice*, where the intensity and personal identity of the music enable a good deal of the stature, if not the actual style, of the literary sources to be preserved. Among younger composers contributing to the operatic canon, none has shown a stronger or more inventive commitment to adaptations of major dramatic sources than Wolfgang Rihm: his works include *Die Hamletmaschine* (1987), a fantasy using Shakespeare as its starting-point, and *Oedipus* (also 1987), which similarly places its Sophoclean topic within a context of more modern commentary. Alfred Schnittke contributed to the long list of operas based on the Faust story, in his *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* (composed 1983–94).

10. Conclusions.

Musical life in the 20th century involved an intricate interaction between old and new, progressive and conservative. Opera houses that were built, and rebuilt, reflect 20th-century principles of design and use specifically 20th-century materials, but at the same time represent concepts of the role of musical composition and performance within society that are not fundamentally different from what they were before 1900. The rebuilding of the Vienna Staatsoper after 1945 was one particular prominent example signifying a deep-rooted belief in the continuing vitality of opera as an institution not requiring radical rethinking in the light of changing social and cultural conditions. New or newly restored opera houses were not primarily intended for the performance of 20th-century operas. For most operatic administrations, experiment was focussed less on challenging new works than on encouraging radical productions of operas from the standard repertory; and touring organizations, which do not depend on a large, fixed establishment, performing instead in a variety of non-standard venues, preferred slimmed-down versions of *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Carmen*, *La traviata*, even *The Ring*, to new or neglected 20th-century works. The engagement of opera with the 20th-century mass-media of radio and television was no less tangential, and even operas dealing very directly with contemporary subject matter, such as John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987), tended to be conceived with the traditional resources of the old-style opera house in mind. (See [TELEVISION](#), §IV.)

Because several of the most popular operas – *Madama Butterfly* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, in particular – have been written since 1900, it is not strictly possible to categorize 20th-century opera as an entirely peripheral phenomenon. Yet with a few exceptions, of which *Wozzeck* is probably the most striking, operas using the 20th century's more progressive compositional techniques have not attracted regular performance in the theatre. Many have nevertheless achieved a certain permanence through issue on CD and video, and the reciprocal relationship between live and recorded performance, if it continues, is likely to play an important role in assisting the dissemination of the more experimental kinds of opera. In this respect such an enterprise as the issue in 1995 of a 1993 Salzburg Festival performance of Luigi Nono's 'tragedy for listening', *Prometeo* (1985), is especially significant.

Many of the finest opera composers of the 20th century successfully explored a notable variety of dramatic subjects. Since Strauss followed *Elektra* with *Der Rosenkavalier*, and Stravinsky moved (over a much longer period) from *Oedipus rex* to *The Rake's Progress*, Henze explored the very different worlds of *The English Cat* (1983) and *Das verirrte Meer*, while Birtwistle relished the contrasts between *Gawain* (1991; fig.30 [not available online]) and *The Second Mrs Kong* (1994). Such contrasts show the adaptability of a consistent musical style, rather than an ability to transform style itself from one kind of opera to another, and that ability may be no less apparent in major composers (for example Puccini and Britten) in whom such wide contrasts of dramatic topic are less evident. This adaptability is one reason why opera, along with associated forms of music theatre, may have a healthy future. If, as seems conceivable, music in the 21st century pursues a kind of classicism that attempts to integrate elements that 20th-

century modernism sought to keep separate, then opera is no less likely to benefit from the development than other traditional genres which, despite all the odds, have survived the great 20th-century experiment.

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Opera (i), §VII: Production

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Opera (i), §VII: Production

VII. Production

1. 17th-century Italy.

Although Italian opera was a brand new form in the decade 1598–1608, it was able, where matters of production and staging were concerned, to draw on many established 16th-century procedures. Indeed, only one expertise had to be newly created for it: the ability of a leading singer-actor to sustain a single role through several operatic acts. With that exception – a significant one, as the future of opera was to prove – the skills required for the staging of opera were available for borrowing and adaptation from earlier musical and/or theatrical forms. ‘Dramatic’ presentation of solo song involving face-play, gesture and bodily movement; deployment on stage of singing choruses and *comparsa* (silent supernumeraries); the mounting of elaborate sung-and-danced ‘production numbers’; the use of oil- and candle-lit changeable scenery (pastoral and urban); the revelation of hells and heavens and the flyings about the stage of supernatural beings (their songs accompanied by instrumentalists cunningly hidden behind the scenes): all these were to be found in Cinquecento courtly music-making, in humanist essays in the staging of classical or neo-classical tragedy, comedy and satyr play-cum-pastoral, or in the spectacular musical *intermedi* sometimes set between the acts of spoken dramas (see [INTERMEDIO](#)).

The exclusive court-connectedness of opera in its first 40 years provided a further reason for operatic staging's being able to slip fairly unobtrusively into existence. It inherited the general convention in Renaissance court theatricals that there was a more or less amiable co-existence between the experts responsible for different aspects of a show, under the exigent or indulgent eye of the local autocrat or ‘academy’, or of an executive nominee: such a figure as Leone de' Sommi or Angelo Ingegneri (both of whom wrote illuminating accounts of staging in the late 16th century that are relevant to the mounting of early opera), or like Emilio de' Cavalieri, who, having been involved practically with *intermedio* and pastoral comedy in the 1580s and 90s, ghosted a preface on the singing and staging of his own operatic *Rappresentazione di Anima, et di Corpo* in 1600. It is in the tradition of such hands-on activity and treatise writing that the composer Marco da Gagliano printed an introduction to his *Dafne* (1608) which makes detailed but undogmatic suggestions about that opera's staging, and an anonymous Florentine around 1630 wrote *Il corago* – an extended job description and handbook for the *corago*, who is a courtly master of theatrical revels (including opera) and unites the roles, later to be separated, of impresario, intendant, drama teacher, director and stage manager.

It is clear from such treatises as these that true acting (as the Renaissance understood it) was required from opera singers, not mere standing and warbling: that a performer's facial play and seemingly natural movement about the stage should embody the meaning of the libretto, and that specifically operatic techniques – slowing down of gestures so that they last the full length of the sung phrase, movement during ritornellos rather than while singing – were thought to be additions to, not substitutes for, serious attention to the eloquent, expressive and lucid presentation of character out towards the audience that was required of spoken acting. The *comparsa* and the chorus (when there was one) needed to be equally attentive: the *comparsa* learning the elaborate battles devised for them by a master of fencing and gracefully filling stage space granted them by the principals in ceremonial scenes; the chorus respectful and responsive to the principals, its movements carefully synchronized but avoiding any sense of a regimented *corps de ballet*. Behind these, the symmetrical scenery, made more easily changeable in the early 17th century by the introduction of sliding wing flats (but best kept at a distance by performers, wherever possible, for fear of showing up

the flat-painter's radical foreshortening of perspective); and above them, the supernatural machines which, it was stressed, had to be moved at a tempo that harmonized with the music and did not discommode any performer who had to sing while riding on them.

The expansion of operatic activity from the later 1630s onwards to include the public and commercial had its shop window in Venice, where paying citizens could see features of production that had been hidden behind princely doors in Florence, Mantua or Rome. Accounts of the Venetian *Andromeda* (1637) and *Bellerofonte* (1642), for instance, celebrate their stylish acting and glittering costumes, their crowds of well-dressed, well-drilled *comparse*, their frighteningly realistic monsters and sophisticated dance interludes, their spectacular machine apotheoses and their smooth changes of scene before the audience's eyes: the décor of *Bellerofonte* was by the inventive and influential scenographer Giacomo Torelli. For the next 40 years, from Naples to Vienna and beyond, commercial, courtly and academic Italian opera was to develop a wide spectrum of scale and finesse in performance, from the productions of small companies touring the Italian cities much in the manner of the popular itinerant *commedia dell'arte* troupes to grandiose and prestigious events like Cesti's *Il pomo d'oro* at Vienna in 1668 (see fig.6 [not available online] above), where the 24 souvenir engravings of Ludovico Burnacini's sets during performance vividly illustrate the culmination of the 17th century's tendency to impose a strong axial symmetry on performers as well as on scenery. Yet an integrated approach to acting in opera – and one the author of *Il corago* would have approved – probably continued in favour well beyond the middle of the century. Even the progressive increase in the length, complexity and potential for vocal display of the operatic aria did not remove the concept of sheer acting skill as a desideratum in the new species of opera star. For instance, in his *Dell'arte rappresentativa* (1699), Andrea Perrucci is as insistent as his forebears on the expressive use in sung as well as in spoken drama of head, eyes, arms and body (deriving much of what he says from the teachings of classical rhetoric) and on a clear frontal presentation of character. In discussing a particular phobia of his – collisions between actors making entrances and those leaving the stage – he suggests that a good way of avoiding these, with entrances from behind an upstage flat and exits as close as possible to the proscenium arch, would be of special value to the opera singer, who can thus leave from the front of the stage (where the light is strongest and contact with the pit band easiest) just after an aria. With *opera seria* and its proliferation of exit arias just coming on stream, this is advice that would have decades of relevance.

Roger Savage

2. France from Lully to Rameau.

Though the librettist of a new Italian piece may have had a considerable say as to its staging, in person or through the stage directions he was able to broadcast over his text, mid- and late 17th-century Italian opera seems not in the main to have been wedded to production practices that required firm, centralized directorial control; but in the 1670s and 80s they ordered things differently in France. There, Lully's reign over the French opera he had virtually created shows directorial presence at its most absolutist, working (probably not coincidentally) in the service of the arch-absolutist Louis XIV. In establishing *tragédie en musique*, Lully was clearly concerned that its staging should not suffer in comparison with that of the spoken comedy and tragedy that was then having such a golden age in France; so this hands-on composer-dancer-violinist-*corago* thought it best to have a direct say in everything (though in matters of design there were major delegations to significant figures, for example Carlo Vigarani and Jean Berain). Lully instructed his casts in person as to entrances and exits, moves and deportment, sometimes showing a performer every gesture of his or her role or demonstrating the pantomimic parts of the inset ballets. His mastery of the local details as well as the complex wholes of his operas in conception and in staging, his having their scores printed and (in effect) copyrighted, his arranging for uncut revivals and his personal training of a generation of actor-singers to perform them: all this led to Lullian opera becoming an influential national institution, and to Lully himself posthumously becoming a potent directorial phantom at the Opéra.

In the 18th century, French opera was more *galant* in mood and also more demanding vocally – provoking the remark ascribed to Rameau that, while Lully's operas needed actors, his own needed singers – but Lullian constructions and stage procedures were still pervasive. Operatic tradition went on setting great store by *le merveilleux*, which meant a greater emphasis on the vertical aspect of the stage – celestial descents, infernal trapdoors and the like – than was called for most of the time in the more 'historical' (and hence horizontal) Italian operas of the age. Then, true to that part of its origins that lay in *ballet de cour*, the tradition also insisted on the frequent incorporation into the action of dance sequences: hence the presence of a *corps de ballet*, which not only danced the symmetrical *fêtes* for the opera's principal characters but was also the resource for any troops of warriors, priests, genii or the like that might be required, in marked contrast to the non-dancing *comparse* who filled equivalent roles in Italian opera.

Another vital distinguishing feature of opera in Paris was its continuing commitment to a major role for a sizable chorus. The entry of the chorus at the Opéra in a *tragédie en musique* or an *opéra-ballet* was a spectacular moment: its richly dressed members advancing in two ranks, one from each side of the stage, to take up their places in an elegant U-formation. By framing the activities of principals, dance troupe and any active theatrical machines in this way, the chorus helped maintain a strong axial symmetry, which may partly explain the rarity on the French operatic stage (outside the work of Servandoni) of the skewed *scena per angolo* that was becoming a popular part of operatic décor elsewhere in Europe.

It is not clear whether in the early 18th century there was much active collaboration, beyond the necessary polite co-existence, between these operatic elements and departments. An at best benign convergence of the arts rather than an organic compounding of them seems to have been the rule. In the performance itself, principals sat graciously out of harm's way during the inset *fêtes*; the dancers tended to wear masks, which set them apart from other performers; and, once settled into its U-formation, the chorus seems rarely to have bestirred itself very much. Still, royal edicts which rationalized the company structure at the Opéra in 1713–14 provided for the appointment of two active administrative 'syndics' (later known as 'directeurs'); and making sure that there was at least a bare sufficiency of liaison must have been the responsibility of 'le syndic chargé de la régie du théâtre'. This officer dealt with artistic planning and casting (in consultation with the composer, if still living) and nominally oversaw all rehearsals and performances. It is a moot point how far his role in the staging of an opera was a creative and how far a purely diplomatic-administrative one; but it is clear that his drawing together of strands made for memorable performances at the Palais Royal. Reviewers would occasionally congratulate 'MM. les Directeurs' on brilliant and satisfying shows that excelled in words, music, casting, décor, costumes, choreography and execution. And individual performances could impress the most demanding critics. Even Rousseau, no lover of the opera as an institution, was impressed enough by the performances there of C.L.D. Chassé – he created several important bass-baritone roles for Rameau – to cite him in the *Encyclopédie* as everything a good operatic performer ought to be: never dropping his character to become merely a singer; forever interesting, even in silence; and conspiring by steps, looks and gestures to make his audience feel that the music rising from the orchestra pit was rising from his soul.

Roger Savage

3. 'Opera seria'

In the Italian tradition as in the French, increasing emphasis was placed on sheer vocal expertise as *opera seria* established itself; and from this sprang the new tribe of Italian vocal virtuosos who had considerable success in the opera house for all that their acting abilities were fairly rudimentary. Yet the truly desirable opera singer was still generally deemed to be one who had (as an intendant of the royal opera in Lisbon in the 1760s put it) '*buona voce a grande estensione di corde, buona figure e buona azione*'.

Once such performers were under contract, and provided they were not too fractious, the staging of *opera seria* was a relatively simple matter. The strong segmentation of the form allowed for discrete cells of activity. If there were ballets, battles or ceremonials to attend to, there was likely to be a *maitre de danse* on hand (and perhaps an associated fencing master) to arrange them; a machinist could advise performers about any theatrical *coups* they might be involved in (descents of airy chariots, magical transformations, collapsing of city walls and the like); and a creative scenographer, or simply a resourceful scene-store keeper, would be ringing the changes on elaborate perspectives ('straight' or *per angolo*) which rendered a fairly limited range of motifs: palace, temple, street, harbour, cave, camp, garden, wilderness and so on. As for the principals working up the recitative-and-aria scenes of psychological interplay that are the staple of the *seria* form, their rehearsals of a new piece may quite possibly have been brief and not strongly directed, but need not be thought of as careless or primitive. For one thing, there were the stage directions of the libretto to be observed, not only for entrances and exits but often also for characters' moods and stage business. For another, performers could easily and independently apply to their recitatives the age's basic courtly stage deportment (a singer could find several primers in print for tragic acting in the spoken theatre, many of the techniques of which would apply equally well to opera). Again, since at the centre of *opera seria* was a spectrum of general emotions expressed one after another in a series of arias, an experienced performer coming to a new opera would almost certainly have given formal histrionic expression to all his or her character's feelings before – sometimes in exactly the same words (as multiple settings of successful librettos were common), sometimes even in the same music if the 'new' piece was a pasticcio. Stage performance of a *seria* aria seems to have been not unlike the 18th-century speaking actor's delivery of a tragic tirade or soliloquy.

Hence a group of competent principals might achieve a fluent, decorous, pointed and telling staging of an *opera seria* (in all but any spectacular or balletic parts) with no more external help than was needful for recording which wings were used for which entrances, the assigning of courtly retinues of *comparsa* and the resolution of any points of princely etiquette or clashes of artistic temperament. Sometimes the impresario or manager might provide such help, or the prompter or the *maestro di cappella* (who might anyway be the opera's composer). But most often it was the theatre's resident poet, in which case he might perhaps take on a more consequential, directorial role at rehearsals.

The comic ironies of Benedetto Marcello's *Il teatro alla moda* (D1720) carry the strong implication that a theatre poet worth his salt would explain the dramatic conception and intentions of his text to the performers in rehearsal, advise them on costume, gestures and the proper sides of the stage for their entrances and exits, and insist on a clear enunciation of his words. Later, Goldoni, who himself had had responsibility 'for directing and coaching the performers' during a stint as poet to a Venetian opera house in the 1730s, put such a figure into his comedy *L'impresario delle Smirne* (1761). There his Maccario, armed with the works of Zeno and Metastasio, some old plays and a rhyming dictionary, practises his specialities of writing new librettos, adapting old ones, fitting new words to old music, instructing the singers in acting, directing the scenes, attending the ladies to their boxes, looking after the *comparsa* and blowing the traditional whistle for scene changes. Metastasio himself would have recognized at least some of this activity. Though it would not have been possible for him to rehearse all the settings of his librettos in person, his letters from Vienna to various sorts of theatre people from the 1730s to 50s show him to have been a careful director – concerned with the effective 'blocking' of scenes, making diagrams of the disposition of characters on stage, supplying detailed analyses of principal characters for composer and singer, offering suggestions for optional stage business over and above that in the printed text to busy intendants three or four countries away. Metastasio's letters also reveal that, however formalized the stage action may have been in *opera seria*, the genre's leading librettist was convinced that telling theatricality in the communication of feeling was the essence of its staging, not the blind following of formula or protocol.

Roger Savage

4. Enlightenment tendencies.

Though librettos of Metastasio went on being set and staged into the 1820s and occasionally beyond, by the 1760s more progressive spirits in writing and staging were entering a new age of sensibility, enlightenment, 'sublime simplicity' and growing concern for theatrical realism, the last partly expressed in a canonization of Shakespeare and a fresh respect for the arts of comedy. One aspect of this was the appeal that *buffo* acting came to have for serious opera lovers. The tiny, often two-person troupes performing farcical intermezzos between the acts of *opera seria* and the rather larger companies giving more extended *opere buffe* had developed a style of acting that was brisker, saltier and more immediately alluring, if not a great deal less governed by convention, than that seen in loftier opera. The unpretentiousness of this style and the leeway it gave for sharp observation of contemporary life endeared it to such observers as Arteaga and de Brosses, who saw its vivacity and 'air of truth' as rebukes to the traditional high operatic stage's tendency to what had come to seem stiffness and frigidity. At a time when David Garrick (the living demonstration that 'Shakespeare and Nature were the same') was shifting the norm of serious acting in spoken theatre away from weighty, slow-moving declamation towards a more energetic, pantomimic mode, it is likely that some of the more seemly aspects of *buffo* style, along with some Garrickian traits, were sharpening the immediacy of serious operatic acting and increasing *its* air of truth.

Garrick was the model for several of the new men of operatic Europe in the mid-18th century, not least Noverre, for whom he was 'the Proteus of our time' and an inspiration behind Noverre's campaign to unmask the dancers in opera and so increase their histrionic potential. But if Garrick was a Proteus, it was the Gluck of the 'reform' operas who was seen by his admirers as the modern Prometheus where, *inter alia*, staging was concerned. One of them in the 1770s describes him as having to deal at first with principal singers whose acting was either lifeless or grotesquely mannered and with 'a collection of mannequins called a chorus'; but 'Prometheus shook his torch and the statues came to life', the principals realizing that the idiom of Gluck's music needed only to be felt to bring strong and true stage impersonation with it, while the chorus members in his operas were 'amazed to discover that they were actors'.

Garrick and Gluck, of course, were not alone responsible for all theatrical change at the time; but praise of this kind provides a frame for such things as the poet Verazi's stagings of his own librettos in the 1760s and 70s, noted for their treating the chorus 'as actors, not statues'; his printing his librettos with stage directions for elaborate business during the normally direction-free da capo arias; the increasing trouble taken by such composers as Jommelli to construct

buffo ensembles which would permit 'natural' acting throughout; the growing tendency of the operatic stage space to be characterized by *chiaroscuro* in lighting, local colour in décor and asymmetry in the deployment of supernumeraries, dancers and scenery; the praises heaped on a singer like Sophie Arnould for her tenderness, energy, soul, sentiment and sensibility; and the determination of Gaetano Guadagni, who had learnt directly from Garrick and created the leading role in *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), to identify with his roles so fully that he refused to acknowledge applause after an aria or give encores.

Few singers may have gone as far as Guadagni in this; but his ideal chimes with a concept of opera involving a carefully monitored synthesis of theatrical arts, all blending together to present a heightened virtual actuality which will enthrall, elevate and edify. The concept attracted support in the later 18th century, although there were differing views as to who should finally be responsible for the careful monitoring. Noverre and Algarotti, influentially urging this conscious integration of the arts as opposed to the traditional *laissez-faire*, both insisted that it was the poet-librettist who, as the begetter of the opera, should be the guardian of its wholeness, and that it was for the other theatre artists to embody the poet's unifying conception. Noverre further emphasized the need for the executive quintet of composer, designer, machinist, ballet-master and costumier to work closely together and for the poet to be on call throughout, which is what happened in the case of the team working on *Orfeo*. It was certainly an authority structure assured of some success in court theatres where the local prince himself was the librettist (or at least the influential drafter of scenarios). Elsewhere it might be the court composer, as with Jommelli at Stuttgart in the 1750s and 60s under the watchful eye of Duke Carl Eugen. According to Christian Schubart, Jommelli used his knowledge of singers, instrumentalists, audiences and theatre acoustics, plus the close cooperation of designers, machinists and choreographers, 'to move and uplift the coldest listener's heart and soul with one great totality'. Or it might be the court intendant for music and drama, as seems to have been the case with Count von Seeau at Munich in 1780–81 when Mozart and Varesco's *Idomeneo* was being prepared and rehearsed. Mozart's letters home suggest a careful collaboration under Seeau's control between composer, conductor, scenographer and choreographer. The lack of the librettist on the spot to advise singers about stage action suggests that the principals were expected to be largely self-reliant and to use appropriate modifications of well-tryed *seria* and Gluckian techniques, taking advice where they found it. They would almost certainly have found it from Mozart in his role as composer-répétiteur, with his earnest concern that recitative should be fast-moving, spirited and fiery in performance, that singers should act, and that the best criterion for librettists, composers and performers alike was theatrical effectiveness.

Roger Savage

5. From Weber to Verdi.

The idea of a 'great totality' of staging, integrated by one man, had a future. German-speaking theatre was allowing room in the 1790s for the notion of a 'Regisseur des Schauspiels' whose responsibilities included 'balancing all the individual details to create the overall effect'; and such ideas influenced influential operatic music directors, including Weber. As overseer of all aspects of vocal and visible activity on stage at the Prague Opera (1813–16), Weber conceived an ideal of a score and staging where 'every contribution of the related arts is moulded together in a certain way, dissolving to form a new world'; and at Dresden (1817–26) he was an advocate of the 'Leseprobe' (the early reading aloud by a company of the libretto to ensure that everyone involved had an idea of his or her place in the whole), was concerned to develop versatility in his soloists and acting ability in his chorus, and was minded to employ a 'literator' to discuss problematical aspects of librettos with performers and a dancing-master who would double as a movement coach and also devise effective stage groupings.

Individualized, picturesque-romantic stagings came to appeal to other national operas around Europe too. For instance, William Charles Macready, the English actor-manager in spoken theatre, was concerned to take great and detailed care in embodying the dramatist's 'picture' on the stage, 'complete in its parts and harmoniously arranged as to figure, scene and action', and saw no reason why he should not apply the same techniques to staging opera in English. But the detailed itemization of stage action that appears in his prompt-books is hugely outdone across the English Channel by the quantity of movement, stage business and character revelation (to say nothing of matters of scenery, costumes and props) recorded behind the scenes at the Parisian *grands spectacles* of the age of Meyerbeer, Auber and Eugène Scribe, for use by stage managers, prompters, répétiteurs and the rehearsers of revivals. Staging almost for staging's sake – flamboyant Romantic-historical décor, crowd effects, exploitation of the new-fangled gas illumination – found itself in the foreground in French *grand opéra*. Of course, the sheer vocal and histrionic skills of such principals as Adolphe Nourrit and later Pauline Viardot were vital to an overall theatrical success; but there was so much else as well to claim the attention. So it is not surprising, given the need to keep some control over it all, that

positions with the fairly interchangeable designations *régisseur de la mise en scène*, *directeur de la scène* and *metteur en scène* begin to appear in Parisian personnel lists.

The newly prominent French *régisseurs* were entrusted with the task of conniving with the operatic team – librettist, composer, company director, scenic artist, costume designer, choreographer and leading singers – so as to devise a durable staging of the latest score, and of making sure that the staging was adhered to during the run. Indeed, it was likely to be set in stone, to become virtually part of the work itself for Parisian revivals and productions in other places, through the *régisseur's* compilation of a sophisticated *livret de mise en scène*, which included a movement-by-movement, prop-by-prop account of the whole complex spectacle. These *livrets*, which evolved from less ambitious attempts in the 1800s to fix the stagings of Parisian melodramas and *opéras comiques* for the benefit of provincial managers, were often put into print; by 1850 over 80 of them had been published in Paris – distant, indirect descendants of the practical preface Gagliano had written for *Dafne* in 1608.

In Italian-speaking opera houses at the time there would have seemed to be little need for such *livrets*. Staging methods which would have been familiar to Goldoni were still being carried out more or less efficiently, and there are records of librettists such as Romani, Cammarano and Piave listing props, coaxing some acting out of singers, 'blocking' chorus scenes (where such existed), organizing *comparsa* and troubleshooting backstage at premières. But as Italian opera, largely through the maturing of Verdi's genius, became theatrically more complex and hence more at risk after the première (which was artistically in the hands of the composer and his close colleagues) – especially when taken up by another company at a distance – a more rigorous means of quality control in staging was called for. If Verdi created the problem, however, he also had, indeed insisted on, a particular solution. Louis Paliante's series of Parisian *livrets de mise en scène* had included accounts of two productions of Verdi pieces with which the composer had been closely involved while in France in the 1850s. Passionately concerned to get and keep stage business right, Verdi was much taken with the *livret* idea. That for *Les vêpres siciliennes* was translated into Italian, and from then on each of Verdi's new operas had its own *disposizione scenica* prepared and printed by his publisher Ricordi with the composer's collaboration. By the end they were immensely elaborate; that for *Otello* (1887) – one for *Falstaff* has yet to be found – includes 270 diagrams of stage positions and moves (see fig.21 [not available online]). 'Because of recent developments in the music-drama, every movement has its *raison d'être* and the old stage conventions are no longer acceptable', says Ricordi in his epilogue to the *disposizione* for *Aida* (1872). He had no cause to ponder what the status of the prescribed *décors* and movements might be when operatic staging itself had developed still further.

Roger Savage

6. Wagner and after.

The story of modern opera production may well be seen as beginning with the first Bayreuth Festival of 1876. Not only was Wagner the prototype of the 20th-century director, but also the festival he inaugurated remained for over a century one of the chief power-houses of developments in dramaturgy. By contrast with the previous theatrical practice, where staging might depend on a combination of interested parties, Wagner, in collaboration with his choreographer Richard Fricke, imposed himself as the central intelligence. Strong emphasis was placed on the role of improvisation and inspiration in stage blocking. Traditional stock histrionics were replaced by 'natural' expression, and singers were encouraged to ignore the audience and respond only to fellow performers on the stage. This was the apogee of illusionism, the prevailing mode in the spoken theatre, at least, from the mid-18th century.

Wagner naturally took a keen interest in the work of Georg II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, whose coincident innovations with his travelling troupe were a huge influence on the evolution of stagecraft. In Meiningen productions, scenery (three-dimensional, using the box set) was designed to accommodate the movements of actors; costumes, props and lighting were exploited to create mood and atmosphere. The duke also did much to establish the supremacy of the director.

When Cosima Wagner assumed control of the Bayreuth Festival after the composer's death, she brought a natural dramatic talent to bear and continued the progressive tendency of naturalistic acting she had observed at the first festivals. At the same time, her pursuit of an 'ideal' performance such as Wagner would have approved led to over-prescriptiveness and the stifling of inspiration.

Naturalism in acting and staging was also sought by Konstantin Stanislavsky, who in 1898 founded the Moscow Art Theatre with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. Recognizing that the representation of inner truth on the stage might

involve an abandonment of realism, he sought to project life not as it is perceived in reality but as it is experienced 'in our dreams, our visions, our moments of spiritual uplift'. These principles, grounded in the system known as the 'Method' (based on the actor's personal experience and identification with the role), were embodied in Stanislavsky's work in the Bol'shoi Theatre Opera Studio, which he founded in 1918. Fusion of words, music and movement was the object, but it was the score rather than the libretto that was to provide the cues.

More revolutionary was the Moscow Art Theatre Musical Studio, founded in 1919 by Nemirovich-Danchenko, who rejected naturalism and realism in favour of the kind of techniques pioneered by Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, strictly synchronizing movement and gesture in abstract settings. Nemirovich-Danchenko, like many others, was influenced by the ideas of the Swiss designer Adolphe Appia, who has been described as 'the father of non-illusionist musical theatre'. Appia aimed to create a theatrical space independent of reality: a 'living background' that projected mood and atmosphere predominantly by imaginative lighting. His set designs were geometrical structures inspired by contemporary constructivist principles but offset by evocative deployment of light and shadow. His theories of opera production, expounded in a series of essays, also proposed simple, stylized costumes and quasi-symbolic, non-realistic stage movements.

Similar ideas were espoused by the English theatre designer and director Edward Gordon Craig, but he also attempted to replace painted scenery with screens, variable in shape, size and colour according to the mood of the scene. His uncompromisingly anti-realist stance further led him to propose replacing actors altogether with 'über-Marionetten': puppets manipulated by an omnipotent director. In his notable productions for the Purcell Operatic Society, 1900–03, his rejection of traditional stage conventions and deployment of coloured light bore witness to the symbolist approach that was to make its effect felt on subsequent generations of directors. As with Appia, Craig's influence was chiefly through his theories rather than his productions. Appia mounted *Tristan und Isolde* at La Scala in 1923 and designed an austere, abstract *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in Basle, 1924–5 (the *Ring* thus initiated was abandoned, after vigorous protests); but his ideas were contemptuously dismissed by Cosima Wagner and not taken up seriously at Bayreuth until the reforming regime of Wieland and Wolfgang after World War II.

There were, however, other progressive spirits in the early decades of the century who followed Appia in rejecting pictorialism. Gustav Wunderwald's anti-naturalistic representation of the rocky heights in his *Rheingold* for the Deutsche Oper, Berlin, in 1914 showed an awareness of Appia's ideas, as did the work of Alfred Roller in Vienna, Hans Wildermann in Cologne, Dortmund and Düsseldorf, and Ludwig Sievert, whose *Ring* was first seen in Freiburg in 1912–13, then again, with some variations, in Baden-Baden (1917), Hanover (1925) and Frankfurt (1926–7). Sievert was able to introduce both a cyclorama (such as Appia had wanted but had been prevented from executing) and a revolving stage. The influence of Appia is also evident in the dark, suggestive, geometric shapes of Sievert's *Ring* designs (the rocky cleft in *Die Walküre*, Act 2, for example), though the slanting walls and converging perspective here produce a composition that was quite original and in turn widely imitated.

Roller's designs for Mahler's Wagner and Mozart productions in Vienna from 1903 onwards applied elements of neo-romanticism to architectonic structures derived from Appia and Craig. A more thorough-going avant-garde director was Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose determination to draw attention to the artifice and mechanics of the act of stage production foreshadowed Brechtian alienation techniques. Meyerhold's first opera production was an imaginatively reductive *Tristan und Isolde* at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg in 1909.

Another prominent director who gave practical expression to the theories of Appia and Craig was the Austrian Max Reinhardt, who played a key role in establishing the director/impresario in the opera house, and is best known for his collaborations with Richard Strauss and Hofmannsthal. Reinhardt's approach was an eclectic one, incorporating elements of realism, symbolism and Expressionism in an attempt to recapture in modern terms the visionary experience afforded by the traditional theatre. The accusation that his 'obtrusive' production method obscured the author's or composer's intention is an early example of the critical reaction against 'producer's opera'.

A new wave of realism, rooted in the anti-romantic, functional principles of the Bauhaus, informed the most stimulating experiment in opera production in the 1920s: the Berlin Kroll Opera under Klemperer (1927–31). The artist and stage designer Ewald Dülberg, who was responsible for productions there of *Fidelio*, *Oedipus rex*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Rigoletto*, aimed primarily at creating clearly defined stage spaces, with starkly lit compositions drawing on principles of Cubist abstraction. Dülberg's costumes for *Das fliegende Holländer* (directed by Jürgen Fehling) were both modern and timeless – Senta sporting a blue pullover, grey skirt and a bright red wig – while the ships were represented as geometric shapes looming in the dark. From 1928 Dülberg's monopoly gave way to the participation of such artists as Caspar Neher, Traugott Müller, Oskar Strnad, Oskar Schlemmer and László Moholy-Nagy. In Moholy-Nagy's controversial *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Romantic scenery was replaced by constructivist designs consisting of

geometric and spiral motifs in the style of the Bauhaus; there were sharp contrasts of lighting, and the playing space was occupied by surreal puppet figures and the first steel furniture to appear on the operatic stage.

Meanwhile, at Bayreuth, Siegfried Wagner celebrated the reopening of the festival after the war (1924) with a sustained attempt, in his final six years, to introduce solid three-dimensional sets and other cautious innovations more in tune with the times. The hand of hallowed tradition weighed heavily, but in his last new production, *Tannhäuser* (1930), there was at last some evidence that the progressive ideas of contemporary music theatre were making headway.

The ascendancy of the Nazis, however, put a stop to virtually all avant-garde experimentation in dramaturgy in Germany. Only at Bayreuth – ironically in view of the close links forged between the festival and the regime – was there any sign that creative thinking had been allowed to continue. Winifred Wagner's appointment of Heinz Tietjen as artistic director of the festival brought the scenic designer Emil Preetorius to the centre of attention. In his essay 'Wagner: Bild und Vision', Preetorius drew attention both to the abundance of natural effects in Wagner's works and to their conception as allegories. On the one hand, he felt that these effects 'must be rendered clearly and with complete illusion'; on the other, he recognized that symbolism must play as important a role in the thinking of the designer as in that of the composer. Like Appia, he laid great emphasis on the use of lighting, allowing its deployment supremacy by reducing stage props to essentials.

At the Metropolitan, New York, at least one cycle of the *Ring* was conducted every year from 1929 to 1939 by Artur Bodanzky, using the faithfully naturalistic sets and bearskins of the Kautsky brothers first seen before World War I. The sets designed for the tetralogy after World War II by Lee Simonson also frequently sprouted foliage, but since Simonson was a Broadway designer, they had more than a touch of modernism as well, with echoes of Sievert and Preetorius.

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7. Since World War II.

The most radical shift in the staging of Wagner, and a key moment in the history of 20th-century opera production, occurred with the reopening of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus after World War II in 1951. Bayreuth had become indelibly associated with the Nazi regime, and it was in a conscious attempt to break with the ideology of the past that Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, the composer's grandsons, discarded all the pictorial sets and their trappings that had become such an outdated fixture. Arguing that there was no incontrovertible reason why Wagner's works had to be given in the naturalistic mode in which they were first performed, Wieland reduced his sets to the bare essentials, essaying fidelity to the composer not on the surface but in terms of psychological truthfulness. The entire action was set on a circular platform or disc, and a cyclorama effectively suggested an endless horizon. The stated aim was to reveal 'the purely human element stripped of all convention'. His abandonment of Wagner's specific instructions was justified by the drawing of a distinction between the stage directions, which remained bound to 19th-century theatrical modes, and the timeless ideas of the works themselves, which demand constantly new representations. The stage directions, in other words, he regarded as inner visions rather than practical demands.

A diametrically opposed set of dramaturgical principles was evident in the work of another hugely influential director of the same era, Walter Felsenstein. Having founded the Komische Oper in East Berlin in 1947, he remained its director until his death in 1975, establishing 'realistic music theatre' on the basis of long, intensive rehearsal periods and committed ensemble playing, but insisting that 'the central figure is, and remains, the singer-actor'. Felsenstein emphasized the creative contribution to be made by performers, inspiring them to replicate the psychological state of the characters they were playing, drawing on their own emotional reserves and experiences. The dramatic portrayals of characters and their interaction had to be persuasive, but Felsenstein also demanded that the act of singing in the theatre had itself to be experienced as a 'convincing, true and utterly indispensable mode of expression'.

Felsenstein's chief legacy was the psychological and social realism he brought to bear, and the emphasis he placed on role identification. His best-known pupils, Götz Friedrich and Joachim Herz, as well as such directors as Harry Kupfer, fused those principles with the quite contrary ones of Brechtian theory to establish the fundamentals of an approach that dominated the stages of Europe, in a variety of contrasting forms, throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Brecht's determination to shatter the illusions constructed by traditional, 'culinary' theatre, as he disparagingly named

it, led him to formulate the *Verfremdungseffekt*, usually rendered as 'alienation effect', though the intention was to alienate the audience from the action in order to engage it more immediately and intellectually.

Alienation techniques were used conspicuously by Friedrich in his two *Ring* cycles, where, for example, he caused Loge, Alberich and Wotan to step outside the framework of the drama to address the audience directly. Such techniques were used to heighten the contemporary relevance that became the hallmark of the work of Friedrich, Herz, Kupfer and other East German directors. Social and political commitment had been an intrinsic element of Felsenstein's productions too, but the incorporation of Brechtian techniques gave the work of the younger generation a sharper ideological edge. It was no doubt the potency of that ideological element that provoked bourgeois capitalist audiences and critics repeatedly to object to what was dismissed as socialist didacticism on the operatic stage – a stage, moreover, not traditionally associated with ideological engagement of any kind.



Scene from Act 1 of Patrice Chéreau's production of 'Siegfried', ...

The Italian Giorgio Strehler and the Frenchman Patrice Chéreau (notably in his centenary production of the *Ring* at Bayreuth, 1976; [fig.49](#)) also attracted criticism in some quarters for the prominence they accorded to the ideological aspects of works. It is no coincidence that the trend they encouraged of directors turning from the spoken theatre to opera was concurrent with the rise of what came to be called, often pejoratively, 'producer's opera'. The age of the producer, or director (as he/she has come, following American usage, more commonly to be known), may be seen as a response to a set of sociocultural factors affecting the reception of opera in the modern era. Chief among these are the decline in the cult of the diva and, arguably, in the individuality of expression (though not technique) of singers; the passing of the era of the autocratic, charismatic conductor who fashioned the production in his own image; and the failure of opera in the 20th century to regenerate its forms or repertory in accordance with the needs of the age. The survival of an antiquated, obsolete genre has necessitated renewal in terms of presentation.

Not all 'interventionist' approaches have a political intention, however: some directors (notably Jonathan Miller) have probed the works from a psychological vantage-point, while others (notably David Freeman) have prioritized emotional directness. Present-day costumes and settings have sometimes, but by no means always, been the chosen means for such explorations. In the 1970s and 80s, some directors attempted to emphasize the universality and timeless relevance of works by incorporating props and costumes from various eras.

'Interventionist' opera productions have also gone hand in hand with the espousal of influential critical theories such as structuralism, post-structuralism (in particular deconstruction), reader-orientated approaches and feminism. The questioning of previous certainties such as the status of the author as the origin of the text, the source of its meaning and the principal authority for its interpretation effected a revolution in the way works, both classic and modern, might be presented. Brechtian theory had already suggested that the bourgeois theatre's illusion of reality could fruitfully be dispelled by disrupting the supposed organic unity of a work, emphasizing instead its discontinuities and contradictions. Now the wider possibilities of exploiting disjunctions between text and music, even of contriving them, and of generating creative tension between surface indicators in the score or stage directions and the action as played out on stage began to be realized.

Principles of this sort were initially most evident in the work of continental, primarily German, directors, though by the 1980s the torch had passed to the younger generation of directors active in Britain. Harry Kupfer had already created over 70 productions, mostly in East Germany, before he came to international attention in 1978; Patrice Chéreau's Bayreuth *Ring* (1976) was more immediately influential. The Gielen-Zehelein regime at Frankfurt (1977–87) produced a series of radical stagings by a team of guest directors including Ruth Berghaus, Alfred Kirchner, Christof Nel and Hans Neuenfels that pressed such ideas into the service of vibrant music theatre. Berghaus's stagings in particular, drawing also on surrealism and the Theatre of the Absurd, influenced the work of younger directors such as David Alden and Richard Jones. Others, such as David Pountney in Britain and Peter Sellars in the USA, ploughed their own furrows, in each case producing a corpus of work that by sheer force of conviction and flair in execution has often been well received even by those of a more traditionalist persuasion.

Alongside such radical developments, a conservative tradition has been maintained in various guises. Visconti's neo-romantic, picturesque opulence was continued by his protégé, Zeffirelli, notably at La Scala and the Metropolitan, while 'fidelity to the text' has been the watchword both of those directors cleaving to the humanist, Leavisite tradition (Peter Hall is a prominent example) and, on the Continent, of those adhering to *werktreu* principles. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that either the mainstream traditional or the radical interventionist productions had a monopoly on invention and imagination. Peter Stein's *Otello* and *Falstaff*, for example, demonstrated that even a

conventional concern for harmony of stage action and score can, in resourceful hands, have electrifying theatrical results.

The 1990s witnessed a backlash against iconoclastic productions, abetted on the one hand by critics and audiences who were never entirely comfortable with the interventionism of the 1970s and 80s, and on the other by a prevailing sense of ideological apathy and cultural malaise. The need, perceived by economically besieged managements, for surefire commercial successes is also a major contributory factor, and the eclecticism afforded by the aesthetics of postmodernism has allowed a wide variety of styles to be essayed with an exuberance and virtuosity that conceal an underlying conceptual vacuum. In general terms, with a few exceptions, the directors most in demand with the major opera houses have offered surface, design-led innovation rather than ideological engagement. Alfred Kirchner's Bayreuth *Ring* (1994–8) exemplifies the trend.

Shifts in public taste will no doubt continue to foster experimentation. In a postmodern age uncertain of its cultural identity, or of the role of opera in society, iconoclasm and traditionalism seem destined to co-exist, giving rise to a multiplicity of stylistic approaches for some time to come.

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